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Sharon Crozier-De Rosa

University of Wollongong, sharoncd@uow.edu.au

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A Novel Approach to History: Arnold Bennett, Marie Corelli and the Interior Lives of Single Middle-Class Women, England, 1880-1914

Abstract

There are many 'gaps' or 'silences'¹ in women's history – especially in relation to their interior lives. Historians seeking to penetrate the thoughts and emotions of 'ordinary' single middle-class women living during the Late Victorian and Edwardian years have a challenging task. These women rarely left personal documents for historians to analyse. Novels, particularly popular or bestselling novels, represent one pathway into this realm. Popular novels are numbered among the few written sources that are available to help historians to fill in some of the absences in the conventional historical record. I have chosen a selection of the novels of Arnold Bennett (1867-1931) and Marie Corelli (1855-1924) to provide insights into the attitudes of, and attitudes towards, unmarried middle-class women at the turn of the twentieth century. The works of both Bennett and Corelli are invaluable sources because each author achieved a substantial level of ongoing commercial success. Their novels are vitally important to historians of mentalité because they focus on recurring themes and issues and consistently support certain views and values. Bearing in mind the extensive readership that Bennett and Corelli each enjoyed, historians can legitimately assume that these authors' ideas and values corresponded with many of the emotional concerns and standards of their audience, and resonated in the minds of their readers, as well as simultaneously entering into the wider contemporary debate.

An enormous body of literature concerning the lives of women during the Victorian and Edwardian eras has been published over the past two or three decades. A large volume of this historical research has concentrated on detailing the social, moral and economic context in which these women operated. A significantly smaller portion of it has dedicated itself to probing the interior lives of women, mostly upper middle- and upper-class women, by using personal documents, such as diaries and letters. This thesis builds on the former, while hoping to complement the latter. It does not aim to supplant or replace previous research into women's history. Rather, it intends to add to it by exploring the emotions and the experiences of women from the middle classes – women whose feelings and thoughts are, for the most part, undocumented. This study explores the implications of using popular novels as an alternative and an additional source for historians attempting to reconstruct the thoughts, feelings and experiences with which unmarried middle-class women were familiar – what Bernard Bailyn terms their 'personal map of reality'.² It does so by examining characterisation, plots and outcomes, recurring themes and issues, and implicit allusions – those noticeable gaps or absences in the fictional narrative. Thus, it analyses the attitudes and emotions of ordinary women, while also testing the extent to which popular novels are useful to historians of mentalité. Moreover, using a comparative approach to examine Bennett's solidly popular middlebrow books and Corelli's phenomenally popular or bestselling novels for their historical insights, this thesis further points to the differences in perspective between literature boasting varying degrees of popularity. It asks the question: which is more valuable to historians – middlebrow or bestselling fiction?

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**A Novel Approach to History:
Arnold Bennett, Marie Corelli and the Interior Lives of
Single Middle-Class Women, England, 1880-1914**

Sharon Crozier–De Rosa
B. A. Hons. (History)

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of History
Faculty of Social Sciences
Flinders University

November 2003

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Abstract

A Novel Approach to History: Arnold Bennett, Marie Corelli and the Interior Lives of Single Middle-Class Women, England, 1880-1914

There are many ‘gaps’ or ‘silences’¹ in women’s history – especially in relation to their interior lives. Historians seeking to penetrate the thoughts and emotions of ‘ordinary’ single middle-class women living during the Late Victorian and Edwardian years have a challenging task. These women rarely left personal documents for historians to analyse. Novels, particularly popular or bestselling novels, represent one pathway into this realm. Popular novels are numbered among the few written sources that are available to help historians to fill in some of the absences in the conventional historical record.

I have chosen a selection of the novels of Arnold Bennett (1867-1931) and Marie Corelli (1855-1924) to provide insights into the attitudes of, and attitudes towards, unmarried middle-class women at the turn of the twentieth century. The works of both Bennett and Corelli are invaluable sources because each author achieved a substantial level of ongoing commercial success. Their novels are vitally important to historians of *mentalité* because they focus on recurring themes and issues and consistently support certain views and values. Bearing in mind the extensive readership that Bennett and Corelli each enjoyed, historians can legitimately assume that these authors’ ideas and values corresponded with many of the emotional concerns and standards of their audience, and resonated in the minds of their readers, as well as simultaneously entering into the wider contemporary debate.

¹ Raphael Samuel is one historian, for example, who uses both these terms. See Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, vol. 1, *Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, Verso, London and New York, 1994, p. 431.

An enormous body of literature concerning the lives of women during the Victorian and Edwardian eras has been published over the past two or three decades. A large volume of this historical research has concentrated on detailing the social, moral and economic context in which these women operated. A significantly smaller portion of it has dedicated itself to probing the interior lives of women, mostly upper middle- and upper-class women, by using personal documents, such as diaries and letters. This thesis builds on the former, while hoping to complement the latter. It does not aim to supplant or replace previous research into women's history. Rather, it intends to add to it by exploring the emotions and the experiences of women from the middle classes – women whose feelings and thoughts are, for the most part, undocumented. This study explores the implications of using popular novels as an alternative and an additional source for historians attempting to reconstruct the thoughts, feelings and experiences with which unmarried middle-class women were familiar – what Bernard Bailyn terms their 'personal map of reality'.² It does so by examining characterisation, plots and outcomes, recurring themes and issues, and implicit allusions – those noticeable gaps or absences in the fictional narrative. Thus, it analyses the attitudes and emotions of ordinary women, while also testing the extent to which popular novels are useful to historians of *mentalité*.

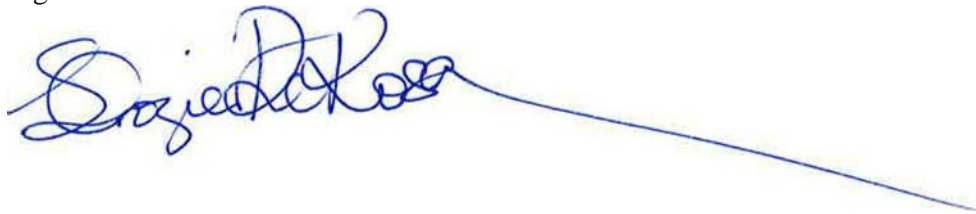
Moreover, using a comparative approach to examine Bennett's solidly popular middlebrow books and Corelli's phenomenally popular or bestselling novels for their historical insights, this thesis further points to the differences in perspective between literature boasting varying degrees of popularity. It asks the question: which is more valuable to historians – middlebrow or bestselling fiction?

² Bernard Bailyn, 'The Challenge of Modern Historiography', *American Historical Review*, vol. 87, no. 1, 1982, pp. 1-24, p.19.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Sayed D. Koo', followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Acknowledgments

A number of people helped me, both personally and academically, throughout the course of this thesis. My sincerest thanks go to:

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Section A

Introduction to the Foundations of the Thesis

The novelist is ‘a historian, the preserver, the keeper, the expounder, of
human experience’.³

‘The secrets of the heart are not to be found in the archives. The things we
really want to know about people are never put down on paper for
the benefit of their biographers. Outside the sphere of music and literature,
the deepest emotions are inarticulate.’⁴

Within this thesis I aim, by using fiction, to add to historians’ understanding of unmarried middle-class women’s perceptions and emotional concerns during the years 1880-1914. Beyond this, and in reference to more popular and therefore more widely read novels, there is a strong argument that the attitudes and the values expressed in some forms of fiction correspond with and affirm those held by many of the readers. To achieve this goal I have chosen to examine a number of the novels of Arnold Bennett (1867-1931) and Marie Corelli (1855-1924). Such a task involves analysing characterisation, plot lines and outcomes, central themes, recurring issues, and even implicit allusions (noticeable absences or gaps rather than explicit statements), while maintaining a knowledge of the context in which these literary works were produced, circulated and read. I aim to reconstruct some of the thoughts and feelings, as well as some of the experiences, with which single women in particular would have been familiar. The areas or aspects of life on which I focus include education, employment and domesticity, spiritual feeling, and romantic love and sexual desire. No doubt I have overlooked other issues concerning the lives of these unmarried women. However, my guiding principle for selecting the aspects that I have chosen to examine in this

³ Joseph Conrad writing in reference to Henry James in 1905, quoted in J. A. V. Chapple, *Documentary and Imaginative Literature 1880-1920*, Blandford Press, London, 1970, p. 13.

⁴ John Brooke, *George III*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1972, p. 55.

thesis has been to take notice of recurring issues or themes that have suggested themselves to be significant and worthy of analysis during a reading of the fictional texts under scrutiny.

The origins of this topic can be traced back to my Honours History thesis, entitled ‘Trollope: Grist for the Historian’s Mill.’ In that study, I examined the interior lives of unmarried middle-class women as depicted in a selection of the novels of Anthony Trollope, who produced an enormous volume of writing between the years 1843 and 1882. I then became interested in the 1890s figure of the New Woman and the social, moral and economic changes that she embodied. This directed my focus to the decades ending the nineteenth century and those beginning the twentieth century. I have specified the years 1880-1914, but, as with any attempt at periodisation, these dates are necessarily flexible.⁵ In order to continue my investigation into the usefulness to historians of middlebrow novelists like Trollope, I chose to analyse the works of Arnold Bennett. Virginia Woolf’s renowned criticism in 1924 of Bennett’s ‘shopkeeper’s’ view of literature did much to recommend him to a study of the lives of ‘ordinary’ middle-class women at the turn of the twentieth century.⁶

However, I also wanted to introduce a comparative dimension that had been absent in my brief analysis of Trollope’s novels and their usefulness to historians. This led me to the phenomenon of bestselling fiction. As a consequence of a vastly changed literary scene, unprecedentedly high sales figures were recorded for

⁵ In the ‘General Editor’s Preface’ to *The Oxford English Literary History*, Jonathon Bate claims that it would be ‘possible to argue endlessly about periodization’. Moreover, in reference to the task undertaken by this Oxford series, he adds that using specific dates to begin and end a period falls in with ‘the false assumption that literature moves strictly in tandem with events’. Still, periodisation is often essential. Each volume of the series in question certainly argues in favour of the specific period on which it has chosen to concentrate its efforts. However, it is similarly stressed that those dates remain flexible – to be treated as a guide rather than as a rule. See Jonathon Bate, ‘General Editor’s Preface’, in Philip Davis (ed.), *The Oxford English Literary History. Volume 8: 1830-1880. The Victorians*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2002, pp. vii-ix.

novels at the end of the Victorian period. Marie Corelli was one of the chief beneficiaries of this – as one of the first ‘modern bestsellers’. So, it seemed entirely fitting to compare her literary works with those of Bennett. What results is a broad view of turn-of-the-century attitudes towards unmarried middle-class women – one that draws on Bennett’s more individual and detailed observations of female thought and behaviour as well as Corelli’s more idealised concepts of femininity. This combined study of the novels of a bestseller and a middlebrow author contributes towards filling in some of the ‘gaps’ existing in a history of Late Victorian and Edwardian women’s interior lives – an area of historical investigation in which there is still much work to be done.

The overall structure of this thesis reflects some of the difficulties that I encountered when attempting to divide this work into chapters along thematic lines. Often a discussion of the primary and secondary material concerning one particular theme spilled over into the discussion of another, necessitating a substantial degree of cross-referencing. For example, the chapter on ‘The Business of Domesticity’ sometimes refers to that on ‘Employment and Careers’; ‘Romantic Love’ often shares information with ‘Sexual Desire’; and the themes explored in ‘Religion and Spirituality’ touch on all chapters, just as they coloured most aspects of Late Victorian and Edwardian life. Consequently, I have grouped certain chapters together and included them under different section headings.

Within each chapter, Bennett’s and Corelli’s texts are treated separately. My initial intention had been to intertwine their insights much more closely. But, the realisation that their respective contributions to a history of middle-class women were often so diverse recommended segregation. This approach also benefited clarity. Still, the overall aim of this study is comparative and so the insights gleaned from the works of both of these popular writers are compared and

⁶ Virginia Woolf, ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’, in *Collected essays I*, Hogarth Press, London, 1966, pp. 319-337. Also referred to in the following chapter, ‘A History of Women’s Emotions Using the Popular Novels of Bennett and Corelli’.

contrasted at various points within each chapter, as well as within the thesis as a whole.

Furthermore, although unmarried women are the primary focus of this thesis, there are limited occasions when discussions touch on the experiences and feelings of married women. In the case of Bennett's novels, these instances are mostly confined to the 'Romantic Relationships' section. Here, examples from early periods of marriage are used to help illustrate the effects on young middle-class women of ideal notions of love and actual experiences of love and sex. References to married women from Corelli's novels, however, are interspersed throughout the thesis. This is because Corelli is much more concerned with idealised notions of femininity than with portraits of individual women. Consequently, there is not always any apparent difference between her treatment of married and unmarried women – especially in regard to ideal notions of femininity which had direct implications for both groups. Ideals are of the utmost importance in her fiction. Therefore, all middle-class women are subject to them – whatever their marital status. Corelli's comments on married women, then, are often pertinent to a discussion of single women.



The following chapters, 'A History of Women's Emotions Using the Novels of Bennett and Corelli' and 'Using Novels as a Historical Source', form the introduction to this thesis. They discuss the scholarly foundations on which this entire study is based.

Chapter 1 addresses where this study fits in the wider historical debate. It discusses recent publications in the area of women's history; the turn-of-the-century concern with the New Woman; the study of *mentalité*; Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli's qualifications as commentators on the subject of Late Victorian and Edwardian middle-class women; and, very briefly, the nature of the turn-of-

the-century literary scene and the advent of the bestselling novel. Problems encountered when trying to marry these various and diverse aspects together have necessitated dividing this chapter into 3 separate sections: women's history; *mentalité*; and the authors and the literary scene. Doubtless this chapter appears somewhat eclectic, but this is necessary in order to give an idea of the broad scholarly debate in which this thesis is situated.

Chapter 2, on the other hand, concentrates on outlining debates more specifically related to the principal source on which this thesis is based – popular novels. It addresses the nature of popular novels, drawing on the relationship between the text and the reader, and on the methods used to extract material of historical importance from them.

Chapter 1

A History of Women's Emotions Using the Novels of Bennett and Corelli

There are many 'gaps' or 'silences' in what has been deemed a history of 'interior life'⁷ – absences that are due, in most part, to a relative shortage of historical records. This scarcity of relevant evidence is only compounded in the exploration of Late Victorian and Edwardian middle-class women's emotions – few women from this social stratum having left personal documents from which historians can reconstruct their private lives. Popular novels, however, provide one pathway into this realm. By their very nature, these novels deal with themes and issues central to the interests of a wide audience. The values they reflect and debate and those they ultimately endorse enter into public discourse. Popular novels, such as those by Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli, then, offer rare and valuable insights into the gaps that are left concerning the picture that we have been able to construct of the personal realities of these women.

An enormous body of literature concerning the lives of women during the Victorian and Edwardian eras has been published over the past two or three decades. Much of this work has been dedicated to analysing the overall social, moral and economic context in which Late Victorian and Edwardian women lived. A substantially smaller section of this writing has concentrated on probing women's interior lives – their individual thoughts and feelings. It is in this latter area of research that there is still an abundance of work to be done. And it is

⁷ For reference to the term 'interior life', see Bernard Bailyn, 'The Challenge of Modern Historiography', *American Historical Review*, vol. 87, no. 1, 1982, pp. 18-19.

primarily within this particular area of historical investigation that this thesis is positioned.⁸

This study relies initially on these available histories of Victorian and Edwardian women to establish the nature of the society in which they lived and the relevant social shifts affecting their lives. Much of what has been written in these general histories has entered firmly into conventional historical wisdom. Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, it suffices to mention very simply and very briefly a number of key scholars and texts that inform this work. Carol Dyhouse, Joan Burstyn and Deborah Gorham have made pivotal contributions to the study of girls and of young women growing up in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England. So, their collective insights into the influence of feminine ideology on female experiences have been used to help establish a solid historical base for this investigation into popular turn-of-the-century attitudes towards middle-class women and into the typical thoughts and feelings of these same women.⁹ As for detailing the nature of the external conditions directing the lives of adult women during this period, the works of historians, Jane Lewis and Joan Perkin, have been most prominent. Perkin and Lewis have been invaluable because they have succeeded in providing broad and systematic analyses of the wide social context in which nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women operated. Accordingly, this study also relies heavily on their research into important aspects of women's lives such as courtship, sex and marriage, education, employment and philanthropy, as well as into less tangible factors such as the effects of idealistic notions, most especially the guiding idea of 'separate but equal spheres', on the lives of middle- and working-class women during the Victorian era (with Lewis extending this

⁸ In order to avoid repetition and to hold up the argument no more than is necessary, I have decided to delay some of the literature review until the appropriate chapters. The various chapters in this thesis have been organised along thematic lines, ranging from education and employment, to spirituality, love and sex, and included within each new section is a short survey of the existing historical research relevant to each area.

⁹ Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, Boston and Henley, 1981; J. N. Burstyn, *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood*, Croom Helm, London, 1980; and Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, Croom Helm, London and Canberra, 1982.

period of inquiry to take in the first half of the twentieth century).¹⁰ Edited collections of essays have also been used as background reading – one of the more recent of these being June Purvis’s comprehensive compilation, published in 1995, which gathers together discussions of key issues relevant to women in this period. This collection makes use of the specific expertise of, among others, Sheila Jeffreys on female sexuality, Jane Humphries on women and employment, and June Hannam on women and politics, to produce a wide-ranging overview of women’s history in the century preceding the 1950s.¹¹ As for publications concentrating more substantially, or specifically, on debates relating to contemporary feminism and to the New Woman (a figure who, whether directly or indirectly, features in a number of Bennett’s and Corelli’s novels, and therefore also in this thesis), one only has to look at the work of historians such as Barbara Caine and Philippa Levine. Whereas Levine concentrates on unearthing feminist achievements during the last fifty years of the nineteenth century, Caine takes a wider perspective – her study of feminism stretching 200 years, from the late-eighteenth century to the last decades of the twentieth century.¹² All of these texts have in common the fact that they effectively challenge the plausibility of many notorious Victorian stereotypes as they relate to women’s lives – instead concentrating on portraying sharply delineated pictures of actual female existence.

Historical texts based on more personal forms of written evidence, such as diaries and letters, have been used to provide further insight into the likely ‘reality’ of individual female existence during this era. Patricia Jalland’s study of *Women, Marriage and Politics, 1860-1914* is one such example. She rests many of her findings on personal records left by women from several generations of prominent political families. Her work reveals, among other things, that individual attitudes to love, courtship, sex and children varied widely, even among the members of this

¹⁰ Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change*, Wheatsheaf Books, Sussex, 1984; and Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women*, New York University Press, New York, 1995.

¹¹ June Purvis (ed.), *Women’s History: Britain, 1850-1945. An Introduction*, UCL Press, London, 1995.

elite cohesive social group. Jeanne Peterson similarly bases many of her historical findings on personal documents. In *Family, Love and Work in the Lives of Victorian Gentlewomen* she centres her research on the diaries and letters that were left behind by women of the Paget family – again discovering a diversity of experience between female members of this restricted social group.¹³

The content and direction of this thesis is situated closer to that of these more ‘interior’ histories than to the majority of more conventional or more general histories of women’s lives. However, where this particular study deviates from studies like Jalland’s and Peterson’s, is that, whereas they are centred around the lives of women from the upper echelons of English society, this thesis concentrates on women from the lower and middle levels of the middle classes and on those from the upper rungs of the lower classes – the women who form the bulk of Bennett’s fictional characters and a large proportion of the general reading public.¹⁴

¹² Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism 1850-1900*, Hutchinson, London, 1987; and Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997.

¹³ Patricia Jalland, *Women, Marriage and Politics 1860-1914*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995; and M. Jeanne Peterson, *Family, Love and Work in the Lives of Victorian Gentlewomen*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1989. In addition to Jalland and Peterson, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall have examined the lives of middle-class men and women, centring many of their findings on remaining family records. Davidoff and Hall’s arguments concerning the lives of these men and women differ from Peterson’s and Jalland’s, and from this project, in that they tend to concentrate on the sexual division of labour within middle-class families in an early nineteenth-century society undergoing changing social and economic conditions. (Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*, Hutchinson, London, 1987.) Furthermore, and still on the related topic of the historical use of personal records, John Burnett has collated and edited a collection of extracts from uncovered nineteenth- and early twentieth-century personal documents. Burnett compiles and only partially or briefly analyses the published and unpublished autobiographies of men and women across a wide range of social classes (although Burnett himself admits that the availability of these documents weighs in favour of men), commenting on topics such as childhood and education, and home and family life. For example, John Burnett (ed.), *Destiny Obscure. Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s*, Allen Lane, London, 1982.

¹⁴ Identifying the precise make-up of the middle classes during the Late Victorian and Edwardian years is an enormously complex task and one that is discussed extensively in numerous other histories of the period. For the purposes of this thesis, it suffices to draw attention to the increasingly broad and varied nature of this social group during this era. This class grew with the expansion of commercial interests. In the later decades of the nineteenth century, it encompassed the upper-middle-class, who increasingly merged with the upper class; the middle rungs of the middle classes; and the lower-middle-class who shared a vague, often flexible boundary with the upper levels of the working-class. It is these last two groups with whom this thesis is most

Like many of these more recent publications on the history of women's lives during the Late Victorian and Edwardian years, this thesis investigates the extent to which the notion of separate spheres affected middle-class women. It also revisits, challenges and sometimes overturns numerous persistent clichés about typical female thought and behaviour. In attempting to penetrate the interior lives of 'ordinary' middle-class women, it reveals just how useful popular novels are for historians of *mentalité*.¹⁵ Moreover, by comparing the historical insights gleaned from Bennett's middlebrow and Corelli's bestselling novels, each chapter raises the issue of differences in perspective between literature boasting varying degrees of popularity. Indeed, comparing the nature and the historical value of Bennett and Corelli's different contributions to an investigation of Late Victorian and Edwardian women's lives is where much of the dynamic of this study lies.

The Late Victorian and Edwardian years were a time of marked social, moral and economic transition – conditions which affected not only the particular situation of many women, but also general understanding of the contemporary concept of womanhood. Individual or 'ordinary' middle-class women were not always personally affected by these changes, given that wider social shifts tend to take a considerable amount of time to filter down to affect individual existence. Still, changes were in progress, which brings us to the figure of the New Woman. The New Woman was, and still is, commonly used to signify the extent of the shifts that turn-of-the-century society was experiencing regarding notions of femininity. And, to varying degrees, she is certainly present in the novels of Bennett and Corelli. Therefore, before launching into a discussion of these authors'

concerned, particularly the lower-middle-class. The lower-middle-class, comprised mainly of the growing number of white-collar employees (including clerks, managers, minor professional people) and shopkeepers and small businessmen, grew most rapidly during this period. And it is argued later in this chapter, that it was they who formed much of the swelling turn-of-the-century readership whose attitudes are explored within this particular study. See François Bédarida, *A Social History of England, 1851-1990*, translated by A. S. Forster and Geoffrey Hodgkinson, Routledge, London and New York, 1990, pp. 144-166; J. F. C. Harrison, *Late Victorian Britain, 1875-1901*, Fontana Press, London, 1990, pp. 49-66; H. C. G. Matthew, 'The Liberal Age (1851-1941)', in Kenneth O. Morgan (ed.), *The Oxford History of Britain*, vol. V, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1992, pp. 25-29; and Jose Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914*, Penguin, London, 1994, pp. 6-11 and pp. 106-110.

contributions to women's history, it is important to account for her existence and to explain something of the public debate that she sparked – a debate concerning the position of middle-class women to which Bennett and Corelli both contributed.

Marie Corelli's novels employ a one-dimensional caricature of the New Woman as an embodiment of all that is wrong with the changing social position of women. Frequent allusions to this concept of womanhood, without accompanying explanation, makes it clear that Corelli's audience was expected to be aware of the New Woman's presence and of all that she implied. Arnold Bennett's fiction, on the other hand, presents a model of the New Woman that is much more true to life. Part of his portrayal of Hilda Lessways (*Hilda Lessways*) is his exploration of her interiority.¹⁶ He uses this 'new woman' to map the tensions existing between traditional notions of femininity and those more suited to English society at the turn of the twentieth century and to the many transformations that it was undergoing. Therefore, the New Woman's presence, if not always openly or explicitly referred to in these popular novels, is at least always assumed. Whether as a one-dimensional caricature or as a model of actual Late Victorian and Edwardian womanhood, she is an integral part of the debate concerning middle-class women in these fictional texts and in this thesis.

Throughout nineteenth-century England there had been so-called 'new' women – women striving for greater emancipation for their sex. What makes the 'New Woman' of the 1890s such a different phenomenon is the nature and the extent of the social change which necessitated and accompanied her emergence, and the fervour of the controversy and discussion resulting from that emergence. It is widely accepted that the term 'New Woman' was first coined in 1894 by the novelist Sarah Grand.¹⁷ Grand's discussion of this female figure provoked an

¹⁵ Researching 'mentalité' is discussed further into the chapter.

¹⁶ Arnold Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, Penguin, London, 1976 [1911].

¹⁷ Sarah Grand is the pseudonym of Frances Elizabeth Belleuden Clarke, author of *The Heavenly Twins*, 1893. Grand's article entitled 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question', in which she uses the term 'New Woman', was published in 1894, in the *North American Review*. (David Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes: Women's Emancipation in the 1890s*, Harvester, Brighton,

immediate reply from the popular nineteenth-century novelist 'Ouida' (Louise Ramé), initiating a debate that raged in contemporary journals and newspapers until the phrase itself faded into the twentieth century.¹⁸

The New Woman, therefore, began largely as a literary creation, and the controversy surrounding her was mainly instigated by the press. She was one of late-nineteenth-century journalism's 'new' phenomena. In fact, according to at least one contemporary author, she was the most notorious of these:

more discussed, debated, newspaper paragraphed, caricatured, howled down and denied, or acknowledged and approved, as the case may be, than any of them [the 'new' phenomena], we have the new woman.¹⁹

Yet, so strong was her presence as a literary image in the journalism of the day that some commentators questioned the reality of her existence.²⁰ Despite such beginnings, the 'type' of woman referred to under the New Woman heading was 'easily recognised in the fiction and the social life of the period'.²¹ For example, in 1895, the New Woman figure, and the debate accompanying her, crossed classes and gender with the publication and bestselling success of Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did*; one year later it also reached the limited and perhaps higher-browed audience of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. And, of course, this level of keen fictional interest reflected contemporary social concern. The fact, for example, that someone needed to coin such a term, and that this term caught on so effectively, was the 'result of a growing sense that there were

1986, pp. 15-16.) See also Barbara Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1992, p. 252. For an extensive discussion of Grand and the New Woman novel see Teresa Mangum, *Married, Middlebrow, and Militant: Sarah Grand and the New Woman Novel*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2001.

¹⁸ Rubinstein, p. 16.

¹⁹ C. Morgan-Dockrell, 'Is the New Woman a Myth?', *The Humanitarian*, vol. VIII, January-June 1896, cited in Juliet Gardiner (ed.), *The New Woman. Women's Voices 1880-1918*, Collins and Brown, London, 1993, p. 16.

²⁰ As evidenced by the title of C. Morgan-Dockrell's article, 'Is the New Woman a Myth?', cited in Gardiner, *The New Woman*, p. 16.

²¹ Rubinstein, p. 18.

changes in the behaviour, the activities, even the nature of women which needed to be articulated'.²²

This is not to argue that the advent of the New Woman resulted from changes solely confined to the 1890s. Rather, by the 1860s these changes were already under way, and were already being discussed – although they did come to a head in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Eliza Lynn Linton's frequent criticisms of 'modern' women exemplifies this. Her critical 'The Girl of the Period' articles, for example, date back to 1868; in 1871 she also published work attacking feminism with references to what she termed the 'Shrieking Sisterhood'; and in 1891 and 1892 she condemned the modern and 'Wild Woman' of English society.²³ Nor was she alone in discussing perceived changes in the nature of femininity. During this period, and more particularly during the 1880s, journalistic debate also centred around the notion of the 'revolt of the daughters' and around the idea of the modern girl.²⁴ The number of women directly or individually affected by issues arising from the era's 'woman question', issues concerning the active campaign for greater economic, political and social freedom, was relatively small – in comparison, that is, with the far reaching influence of the whole New Woman phenomenon.²⁵ And, certainly, the widespread effect of this image was actuated by the power and reach of the press. However, it can hardly be denied that it was also prompted by many expressions of interest in the general concerns of the New Woman by the women of the period – a level of interest no doubt motivated by noticeable changes to the contemporary social context in which women operated.²⁶ The popularity of the New Woman figure, it follows, signifies the extent of the shifts Late Victorian society was experiencing.

²² Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, p. 252.

²³ Rubinstein, p. 17.

²⁴ Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, p. 252.

²⁵ Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, p. 363.

²⁶ By early 1894, again the year normally attributed to the coining of the term, New Woman, for example, 'the demands of women seeking emancipation had reached such a pitch that it was fairly common to write in terms of a 'new' womanhood'. (Rubinstein, p. 15.)

Many of these gradual social changes taking place in England, leading up to the last decade of the century, rendered the position of many women susceptible to change – which allowed and assisted the rise of the New Woman. In 1901 in England and Wales a ‘surplus’ of over one million women was recorded – a figure which included a striking imbalance between the sexes at marriage age.²⁷ This meant that by the latter years of the nineteenth-century many women could not marry, whether they wished to or not.

The decreased opportunity for marriage, along with increasing opportunities for education (secondary and tertiary) and for employment were among factors that led a growing number of middle-class women to seek employment, if not an actual career, and thereby to reject, at least for some years, the more conventional roles of wife and mother. Changing demand for labour – due, for example, to the expansion of elementary education, or to the technological and consumer changes which made it possible for women to work in offices, using the new office equipment, and in the ever increasing number of more modern shops – meant that many women seeking work, albeit lowly paid work, found new doors open to them.²⁸

Of course, increased job opportunities did not lead all, or even a large proportion of women at the turn of the century to change their lives by rejecting, or even challenging, the status quo as far as the expected roles of women were concerned. As the novels of both Bennett and Corelli demonstrate, many were either comfortably living more conservative lives, or content not to challenge the prescribed boundaries of female experience. Nevertheless, the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries underwent social changes that

²⁷ Rubinstein, p. 12. A comparatively high male emigration rate is one given explanation for such a discrepancy. For example, see Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change*, Wheatsheaf Books, Sussex, 1984, pp. 3-4; and Rubinstein, p. 12.

²⁸ Rubinstein, chapter 6 ‘Salaried Ladies’, pp. 69-93; and Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement*, Martin Robertson, Oxford, 1981, p. 181.

did create some opportunities for women to rethink their expected position in society.

As the historian Barbara Caine argues, these are small-scale social changes, but they all contribute to the build-up of a particular image of womanhood in late-nineteenth-century Britain that was very different from that of their earlier Victorian counterparts.²⁹ This is not to imply that this image, whether of womanhood in general or of the New Woman in particular, is either clear or cohesive. The New Woman, for example, cannot be reduced to one clear image of womanhood with one clear set of characteristics.³⁰ Rather, she is typically represented by a collage of ideas – all with at least one thing in common – the desire for greater female emancipation than her present society granted her.³¹ The New Woman of the 1890s, from fiction to actuality, operated across a broad spectrum of ideas and experiences.

The New Woman label was first coined for and applied to a small minority of mainly middle-class women who were perceived as unhappy with the role their society prescribed for them. They were women who openly challenged the values, certainties and male assumptions of their society.³² But with its acceptance as a commonly-used term, New Woman came to mean a woman simply in touch enough with modern thought to recognise that problems existed for women and that the solution lay with the improved status of their sex – through emancipation

²⁹ Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, p. 249.

³⁰ However, Amy Cruse paints a picture of the New Woman which is highly unified. Her set of qualifying specifications that the New Woman had to measure up to are extremely rigid – leaving little or no room for the inevitable individuality and diversity that any collection of people displays. See Amy Cruse, *The Victorians and Their Books*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1962 [1935], p. 338.

³¹ According to Susan Higgins, the New Woman of New Woman fiction, for example, is a heroine who articulates her feelings on controversial topics, such as marriage and prostitution, more than her predecessors did, but who does not ‘triumph’, nor does she ‘recant’. She is a woman who is ‘generally portrayed as morally aware and true to her unconventional principles, and she is no sexual libertarian.’ (Susan Higgins, *Love and Ideology: Feminism and British Fiction, 1880-1950*, PhD Thesis, University of Adelaide, 1978, pp. 9-11.)

³² Gardiner, *The New Woman*, p. 7.

whether it be sexual, personal, financial, intellectual, or in any other area where oppression was felt.

By the turn of the twentieth century, as the number of women affected by changing social conditions grew, the label New Woman and all that it stood for became applicable less to the radical few, and more to the larger band of women who believed that their sex needed or desired greater social and personal freedom. Hugh Stutfield, in his *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* article 'The Psychology of Feminism' in 1897, agreed with this. To him the New Woman meant 'simply the woman of today striving to shake off old shackles' – anything from the existence of a sexual double standard and the inferior legal position of the wife, to the lower wages of female workers and the lack of adequate education opportunities for women.³³

The New Woman, then, transcended her literary origins. She was not simply Eliza Lynn Linton's 'Girl of the Period', one of her 'Shrieking Sisterhood' or 'Wild Women' – a 'fast', sexually forward, vain, immodest, selfish, anti-maternal, anti-male, smoking, 'demi-monde' lookalike. Nor was she simply the poetic heroine, standing on the future's threshold, contemplating the pain and suffering of her fellow women with nothing but sadness and love in her heart.³⁴ Indeed, she could not even be defined as the enlightened woman who wished that she could be taken down off her metaphorical pedestal so that she could go about fulfilling her God-appointed role of man's helpmate more efficiently.³⁵ The New Woman could be any of these women, or even a mixture of them. She could be any woman of broadened horizons – broadened in the sense that she had the ability to see past the often confined image of womanhood that her society put before her. Whatever the case may be, the New Woman and the seemingly incessant debate that

³³ Stutfield was at least one contemporary who was convinced of the reality of the New Woman: 'the immense mass of "revolting" literature cannot have grown out of nothing, or continue to flourish upon mere curiosity.' (Stutfield cited in Rubinstein, p. 20.)

³⁴ Alluding to the heroine of a poem signed D. B. M. and published in *Shafts*, 1894, cited in Gardiner, *The New Woman*, pp. 14-15.

accompanied her brought important issues concerning the position of women in Late Victorian society to a wide and diverse audience.³⁶

Bennett's and Corelli's respective levels of popularity certainly helped to ensure that public discussion of the New Woman, or at least public allusions to her, continued past the later years of the nineteenth century and into the early decades of the twentieth century. As has been argued, each of these writers employed this renowned image of womanhood and the debate surrounding her for widely diverging purposes.

Corelli's novels make frequent critical reference to the stereotype of the New Woman – to the coldly intellectual, Girton educated, 'Christ-scorning', sexually knowledgable, ugly, short-haired and bespectacled bicycle-riding and tennis-playing female.³⁷ But she also uses her as something of a measuring stick against which to test the limits of acceptable female behaviour. That is to say, Corelli often allows the thoughts and actions of her heroines to extend past the limitations normally set in place by Victorian ideology, particularly as these relate to their intellectual capabilities and their career goals, provided that she deems these capabilities and goals to be appropriate according to her notion of femininity. She allows their thoughts and attitudes to sometimes creep dangerously close to boundaries challenged by the New Woman, only then to completely withdraw

³⁵ C. Morgan-Dockrell, 'Is the New Woman a Myth?', cited in Gardiner, *The New Woman*, pp. 16-19.

³⁶ The New Woman is a term which, Rubinstein believes, denotes a growing unorganised leaderless movement which almost succeeds in turning Victorian values upside down. In any event, it is a 'movement' which helped to advance the views of English society concerning women. (Rubinstein, p. 20.) The advancement of feminist discourse proves, to some degree, the positive effect of the New Woman phenomenon on the ideas society held regarding female emancipation. By the turn of the century, and in contrast to the mid-Victorian period, feminist circles more openly discussed more controversial topics – topics their Victorian counterparts sometimes stayed away from, such as sexual autonomy for women in marriage, sexual pleasure, venereal diseases and prostitution and to some extent birth control, abortion and divorce.

³⁷ For examples of her frequent outbursts against the New Woman and against popular New Woman novels, see Marie Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, Methuen, London, 1912 [1896], for example, p. 17 and p. 104; and Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan or The Strange Experience of One Geoffrey Tempest, Millionaire. A Romance*, Methuen, London, 1895, for example, p. 81, pp. 371-372 and p. 405.

back into a world of nostalgic romance, one safely directed by a solidly mid-Victorian sense of morality.

Bennett's treatment of the New Woman differs quite dramatically from Corelli's in that he demonstrates a much more genuine interest in many of the topical concerns raised by this figure. His fiction is particularly valuable in that it often portrays aspects of the interior life of the New Woman, or rather, of individual 'new' women. And it is this understanding of the New Woman that is most suited to this particular historical investigation – not that of the popular press stereotype. Newspapers and journals could produce one-dimensional stereotypes and caricatures of the New Woman. Bennett, on the other hand, as a middle-brow author dealing in the reconstruction of his immediate world, had the task of portraying her humanity or her interiority. By presenting aspects of the New Woman in his female characters, by infusing the stereotype with life, he created the 'new woman', or 'new' women, that most of his readers would have readily recognised in their everyday lives. This is why his thoughts are invaluable as contemporary insights into the 'reality' of the New Woman's existence.

Furthermore, in probing the 'new' woman's thoughts and feelings, Bennett's fiction overwhelmingly reinforces the notion that in many ways the 'New Woman' represented the existing tensions between 'the old' and 'the new' – tensions especially prevalent in a society in obvious flux such as that evident at the turn of the twentieth century. His chief vehicle for playing out this battle between 'traditional' and 'modern' is Hilda Lessways – a central character of his novel, *Clayhanger* (1910), and the heroine (if such a term is appropriate) of its sequel, *Hilda Lessways* (1911). He explores the turmoil of her interior world – plotting, not only the tensions that exist between her hopes and ambitions, and the expectations and limitations of the outside world (that of the English Midlands at the turn of the century), but also those that take place within her own mind. He traces the conflict between her fierce yearnings for independence and freedom and her quieter, conflicting desires to conform to the more traditional ideas of her

society. No matter how much Hilda wishes to be different from ‘other girls’ and from her mother – from nineteenth-century expectations – the very fact that she is a product of all of these means that she can never fully escape from them. Indeed, as Bennett implies, often she does not really want to. Nevertheless, in her foiled attempts to flee a life conventionally open to women – one of domesticity, a suffocating existence that she detests – she looks to the male domain. She believes that the degree of freedom and independence that she desires, or needs, is only attainable there. By desiring to, and attempting to, enter such a domain, Hilda brings upon herself feelings of frustration and displacement – feelings typical of ‘new’ women.³⁸

Clearly, Hilda is not a stereotypical Victorian woman, nor is she a stereotypical New Woman. Instead, she is a mixture of the two. She is one of the many women regarded as ‘new’ in turn-of-the-century England – one of the many women coping with the visible changes, whether obvious or subtle shifts, that her society is undergoing. By providing readers with an insight into the individual thoughts and feelings of a fully realised ‘new’ woman, Bennett reveals the degree to which a sense of tension, again one wrought largely by the transitional nature of this era, coloured the thoughts and experiences of his contemporary society. The frequency and the extent to which he penetrates the existence of this inner tension, especially that existing between more ‘traditional’ and more ‘modern’ concepts of womanhood, and the many references to the New Woman debate in Corelli’s bestsellers, helps to signify just how far the contemporary debate about the single woman engaged the minds of their contemporary readership.



Attempting to penetrate the interior lives of middle-class women living in the past draws on two intricately related areas of historical investigation – a history of

³⁸ Hilda’s feelings about all of these issues are discussed further in the relevant chapters.

mentalité and a history of emotions. These are expanding realms of study, and areas that certainly lend themselves to an analysis of popular novels.

Very briefly, the study of *mentalité*, roughly translated as ‘mentalities’ or ‘mindsets’, emerged from the French *Annales* School founded in 1929 by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. This school of thought and the interest in cultural history that it promoted arose from a strong reaction against traditional, politically-centred nineteenth-century historiography.³⁹ Although originally a branch of social history, cultural history soon developed into an independent area of investigation – one supporting the belief that ideas and values are not simply imposed from above on those below, and one arguing that the study of the history of ‘ordinary’ people and their everyday life and thoughts (as opposed to major political events and to the actions, and even the thoughts, of ‘Great’ historical figures) was certainly worthy of serious historical research.⁴⁰

This history of *mentalité* involves a study of the cultures of ‘ordinary’ people – their individual and their collective ideas.⁴¹ Peter Burke identifies three main features of any study of mentalities as, firstly, a stress on ‘collective attitudes’; secondly, a concern with ‘unconscious assumptions and everyday thought’; and thirdly, a focus on ‘the structure of belief’.⁴² His view is that this area of investigation serves to fill in the gap between ‘narrow definitions of the history of ideas and social history’ – that its development works to save historians from having to make a choice between ‘an intellectual history with the society left out and a social history with the thought left out’.⁴³ Bernard Bailyn’s approach to the

³⁹ See for example, Jeremy Black and Donald M. MacRaid, *Studying History*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London, 1997, pp. 66-67; Patrick Hutton, ‘The History of Mentalities: The New Map of Cultural History’, *History and Theory*, vol. 20, 1981, pp. 237-259, particularly pp. 239-247; and Peter Stearns and Jan Lewis (eds.), *An Emotional History of the United States*, New York University Press, New York and London, 1998, p. 3.

⁴⁰ Black and MacRaid, p. 112.

⁴¹ Hutton, p. 239; and Black and MacRaid, p. 111.

⁴² Peter Burke, ‘Strengths and Weaknesses of the History of Mentalities’, in Stuart Clark (ed.), *The Annales School: Critical Assessment*, vol. II, Routledge, London and New York, 1999, pp. 442-456, p. 442.

⁴³ Burke, ‘Strengths and Weaknesses of the History of Mentalities’, p. 443.

study of *mentalité*, or what he terms ‘a community’s interior life’, is less precisely structured than Burke’s and more emphatic regarding its validity as an independent area of investigation. Any attempt to present such an ‘interior life’, as he sees it, involves the depiction,

however crudely, [of] not only people’s ideas and beliefs as expressed in formal discourse but their deeper, interior life: the assumptions, attitudes, fears, expectations, and aspirations that together formed people’s private construction of the world, their personal map of reality, their system of ordering life, of imposing meaning on the stream of experience.⁴⁴

The direction that this thesis assumes in relation to interior history is closer to that adopted by Bailyn than that of Burke.

The study of what has been termed a ‘history of emotions’ has only been formally established over the past two decades. Although the idea of studying the emotions and mindsets of people in the past has certainly been a recognised and acknowledged aspect of social history, some historians agree that ‘emotions history’ was only given formal focus with the publication in 1985 of Peter Stearns and Carol Stearns’s article ‘Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards’ in *The American Historical Review*.⁴⁵

Alison Light, who uses fiction to underpin her analysis of English women’s attitudes between the wars, believes that a history of emotions is the history ‘of the economies which organize what is felt and lived as a personal life but which is

⁴⁴ Bernard Bailyn, ‘The Challenge of Modern Historiography’, pp. 18-19. In addition, Theodore Zeldin points out that studying ‘personal history’ – investigating issues such as the permanency and constancy or the mutability of human emotions – is not a substitute for analysing the history of ‘collective behaviour, institutions and communities’ but rather it is a counterpart to it. (Theodore Zeldin, ‘Personal History and the History of the Emotions’, *Journal of Social History*, vol. 15, 1982, pp. 339- 347, p. 340.)

⁴⁵ Stearns and Lewis point out that this field of emotions history is both old and new. That is to say, social history, as evoked by historians such as Febvre and Bloch in the 1920s and 1930s, called for work on the nature and impact of emotional change. However, the formal study of this area of history dates back only about two decades. See Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, ‘Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards,’ *The American Historical Review*, vol. 90, no. 4, 1985, pp. 813-836; and Stearns and Lewis, p. 3 and p. 7.

always inescapably a social life'.⁴⁶ People are not only individuals, but also social beings. The thoughts and feelings they experience are often a reaction to the dictates of their surroundings, to their society's pressures, demands and expectations. Therefore, individual experiences can often be seen to be representative, or typical, of the collective feelings of people, or a significant group of them, in the same or in similar circumstances. Peter Stearns and Jan Lewis subscribe to similar views. They describe emotions history as 'first of all, an attempt to recover that living presence, to recapture the way history felt'. They continue:

History has been felt; the lives men and women have lived have had an emotional dimension. That dimension has not only given shape to history but also created history, as men and women have acted on their feelings, sometimes knowingly, sometimes not.⁴⁷

However, Stearns and Lewis place even greater emphasis on the distinction between precept and experiences – between emotional standards (what Stearns refers to as 'emotionology' and which I understand to mean socially expected emotional actions and reactions) and individual emotional experiences. The former are collective expectations, for which there is often prescribed and guiding literature, and the latter the reality of actual emotional experiences.⁴⁸ Such a focus helps to clarify the complex interrelationships existing between expressed emotional values and inner experience, thereby drawing attention to the important task of interpreting 'silences' extremely carefully.

Emotions are studied, not only because they matter, but also because they change over time.⁴⁹ As John Tosh argues,

⁴⁶ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*, Routledge, London, 1991, p. 5.

⁴⁷ Stearns and Lewis, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁸ For a full outline of the distinctions between these two sets of standards and experiences, see Stearns and Stearns, 'Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards,' pp. 813-836.

⁴⁹ Stearns and Lewis, p. 2; and Peter Stearns, Review of *Romantic Passion: A Universal Experience?*, William Jankowiak (ed.), *Journal of Social History*, vol. 29, no. 4. 1996, pp. 971-972, p. 971.

The study of collective mentalities is concerned in the first instance to re-create the emotions and intellect of people living in conditions very different from our own, so that their humanity can be more fully realized.⁵⁰

And so, quite obviously, to recapture the essence of these past ‘interior lives’ historians have to be continually wary of psychological anachronism – of falling into the trap of imposing ‘contemporary ideas and agendas’ on the way people lived and thought.⁵¹

Finding sources that offer a pathway into such an elusive area as the history of emotional values and inner experiences is often difficult. However, inroads have been made. Jeffrey Richards, for example, recommends popular culture as being useful for this purpose. He argues that:

For the historian concerned with the real spirit of an age, the collective *mentalité*, the popular culture is of the greatest value; the high culture often misleads.⁵²

This thesis agrees. It considers the popular writing of Bennett and the bestselling novels of Corelli to be more revealing of the thoughts and feelings of ‘ordinary’ people at the turn of the twentieth century than highbrow fiction that, by its very nature, appeals to a more select, necessarily smaller group of people.

Linda Rosenzweig also supports the use of popular fiction in a history of emotions. She employs insights gleaned from novels, along with those from journals, letters, magazines, articles and diaries, in her study of the emotional relationships between mothers and daughters in America at the turn of the twentieth century.⁵³ In the absence of other documents, these sources, she argues, are particularly valuable in

⁵⁰ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History. Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, Longman, London and New York, 1991, p. 231.

⁵¹ Black and MacRaid, pp. 77-78 and p. 114.

⁵² Jeffrey Richards, ‘What is the History of Popular Culture?’ in Juliet Gardiner (ed.), *What is History Today?* Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London, 1989, pp. 126-128, p. 126.

⁵³ See Linda W. Rosenzweig, *The Anchor of My Life. Middle-Class American Mothers and Daughters, 1880-1914*, New York University Press, New York and London, 1993, chapter 3 in which she analyses fourteen popular novels for the ways in which they present mother-daughter relationships over the three decades under study.

expressing women's thoughts and feelings. However, she also draws attention to the whole issue of representativeness – to the degree to which the sentiments they contain are either typical or eccentric:

Obviously, middle-class female behaviour patterns and values varied. The issue of representativeness poses a particularly difficult problem for the historians engaged in an effort to understand the private, emotional experiences of family life in the past.⁵⁴

Still, in spite of the many limitations, Rosenzweig concludes that when viewed together, all of these sources are revealing of women's experiences and their attitudes, as well as being revealing of the general social and cultural expectations of the time in regard to women.⁵⁵

This investigation into sources will be extended further in chapter 2, where it is more pertinent to the issue of using fiction as a historical source. Here, it is more immediately relevant to discuss the two authors on whose insights this thesis is centred – Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli, and the literary world in which their works were written and read.



Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli were chosen principally because their writings were firmly placed within the changing literary world of the period under analysis – the Late Victorian and the Edwardian years, roughly from 1880 to 1914.⁵⁶ Moreover, they each succeeded overwhelmingly in using these changing conditions to their advantage.⁵⁷ Both benefited from the increasing commercial

⁵⁴ Rosenzweig, p. xi. Also, Black and MacRaid believe that the nature of the sources used in this area of historical study – their 'typical' or 'eccentric' characteristics – represents real problems for cultural historians. (Black and MacRaid, p. 115.)

⁵⁵ Rosenzweig, p. xi.

⁵⁶ The changing nature of this literary world was vital to the respective levels of popularity achieved by each of these authors, and so will be discussed later in the chapter.

⁵⁷ For a comparison of their respective approaches to the growing nature of authorship as an actual profession, see Timothy J. Wager, *Negotiating the Marketplace: The Professionalization of*

focus of the literary and publishing world and from the expanding reading public by attaining levels of popularity seldom achieved before this period – a factor that renders their fiction invaluable to historians intending to access the popular values and views of the time. Marie Corelli wrote and published novels throughout this entire period. Unlike Corelli, Arnold Bennett did not start writing fiction until the later years of the 1890s. His first novel, the somewhat autobiographical *A Man from the North*, written between 1895 and 1896, was published in 1898. (Indeed, both Corelli and Bennett published fiction beyond 1914, but it is generally accepted that the most popular novels of each of these writers appeared before the war.)

Firstly, to Arnold Bennett. Bennett was born Enoch Arnold Bennett in Hanley, Staffordshire in 1867. As a young man he studied law and between 1885 and 1893 he worked in his father's law firm and then in a solicitor's office in London. Before producing a large number of novels, plays and non-fictional works until his death in 1931, Bennett worked as a free-lance journalist and then assumed an editorial role on the weekly journal, *Woman*.⁵⁸ He resigned his editorial position in 1900 in order to pursue his writing career on a full-time basis.⁵⁹

Authorship in England, 1880-1920, PhD Dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1999, especially pp. 203-231.

⁵⁸ Clotilde De Stasio voices her surprise that so little has been written on, and therefore seemingly little importance attached to, Bennett's work on *Woman* in the 1890s. (Clotilde De Stasio, 'Arnold Bennett and Late Victorian Women', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1995, pp. 40-53, p. 40.) However since De Stasio's article in 1995, Peter D. McDonald, at least, has written on Bennett's literary career, concentrating on his serial publications, but including the time he spent working on *Woman*. See Peter D. McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.

⁵⁹ John Lucas, 'Arnold Bennett', in James Vinson (ed.), *Great Writers of the English Language. Novelists and Prose Writers*, Macmillan, London and Basingstoke, 1979, pp. 111-115. Other readings on Bennett include: John Lucas, *Bennett. A Study of His Fiction*, Methuen, London, 1974; Margaret Drabble, *Arnold Bennett*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1974; and Georges Lafourcade, *Arnold Bennett: A Study*, Frederick Muller Ltd, London, 1939. Shorter readings include: 'Bennett' entry in Sandra Kemp, Charlotte Mitchell and David Trotter, *Edwardian Fiction. An Oxford Companion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1997, pp. 27-28; and Anita Miller, 'Arnold Bennet', in *Dictionary of Literary Biography. Vol. 34. British Novelists, 1890-1929: Traditionalists*, Thomas F. Staley (ed.), Gale Research Company, Detroit, 1985, pp. 17-28.

Within this thesis, I use Bennett's novels in order to access the valuable insights that they contain regarding the thoughts, feelings and personal experiences of 'ordinary' women, primarily middle-class women, at the turn of the twentieth century. It is for this task that Bennett, as an author of fiction, is particularly suited. It is widely acknowledged that Bennett's uniqueness rests with his portrayal of the more 'ordinary' or 'mundane' aspects of individual lives – whether female or male. In any attempt to develop a more detailed or finely focussed picture of life at the time, to penetrate a more personal or interior history, particularly with regard to women, it is these aspects that are undoubtedly significant.

John Carey appoints Bennett the 'hero' of his book *The Intellectuals and the Masses*. His primary reasons for doing so are his beliefs that, not only do Bennett's writings 'represent a systematic dismemberment of the intellectuals' case against the masses', but also that his position as mediator between the two is the result of a conscious decision.⁶⁰ Bennett was of the opinion that, not only was it not admirable to write 'above' the 'masses', but that, to the contrary, it was the artist's responsibility, and indeed an indication of superior artistic faculties and sensibilities, to look 'to the masses – or, rather, to the hidden lives which that crude metaphor deletes – for its natural succour'.⁶¹ Indeed, he felt that he would fail as an artist if he could not successfully explore the extraordinary depths of 'ordinary' people, or as he, in true Bennett style, writes it, if he could not 'take a Pentonville omnibus and show it to be fine'.⁶²

⁶⁰ John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses. Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia 1880-1939*, Faber and Faber, London, 1992, p. 152 and p. 154. Wager agrees, claiming: 'Bennett was able to develop and maintain a fairly large audience, while striking an open compromise between market and ideals by making the work of marketing the ideal to which he aspired. While this may not have secured for him a lasting place in the canon as established by the academy, and may have put him out of favor with some of his contemporaries, its pragmatic approach has to it a certain genius'. (Wager, pp. 231-232.)

⁶¹ Carey, p. 154.

⁶² Carey, p. 163. The 'Pentonville' omnibus reference conjuring up an image of the very 'ordinariness' of lower middle-class commuter existence (Pentonville being a lower middle-class suburb in London in Bennett's lifetime).

This is not to say that Carey's view of Bennett's position on the issue of the 'masses' is uncontested. On the contrary, it faces opposition from another scholar examining the literary scene at the turn of the twentieth century, Peter D. McDonald. McDonald disagrees with the view that Bennett's fiction entirely supports the case of the 'masses', claiming that this popular author's opinions and attitudes were much more complex than Carey allows. He argues, by examining Bennett's journalism, which he points out that Carey does not do, that Bennett was neither a populist nor an elitist.

This is not simply because he was less concerned about the intelligentsia's general social prejudices than he was about the purists' position in the literary field, but because he was also equally antagonistic to the masses' anti-intellectualism.⁶³

Nevertheless, in Carey's mind, Bennett does not fail his own definition of an artist, for he pronounces what he calls this writer's 'masterpieces', *Clayhanger* and *The Old Wives' Tale*, to be 'Pentonville omnibus novels'.⁶⁴ His justification of this is his claim, on reading these novels, that: 'We know by the end that their characters are not remotely ordinary, but unforgettably singular. Yet they are also commonplace'.⁶⁵ Carey's comprehension of Bennett's 'Pentonville' pieces supports the importance and representational value of probing individual interior experiences to help reveal the face, or indeed the hidden face, of a society. Bennett works to:

assure us of the basic sameness of people, despite social and educational differences. [Yet] He also insists on the absolute

⁶³ In contrast to his own chapter on Bennett's place in the literary world which also examines Bennett's serial publications and the journals and magazines in which he was published, McDonald comments that Carey concentrates on Bennett's more serious fiction while ignoring his journalism and serial publications. (McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*, p. 95 and p. 110.)

⁶⁴ Carey, p. 163.

⁶⁵ Carey, p. 163.

singularity of each person, especially of seemingly unimportant people.⁶⁶

The insights Bennett offers his readers are individual and, so, should be treated as such. But this does not render them atypical or unrepresentative. Each individual's private thoughts and emotions are unique, but they are still the product of a shared society – often reactions to common external circumstances. By probing behind the 'mundane façades' of the 'ordinary' man or woman in the street, Bennett gives us access to, what Carey understands as, 'the realities that blaze and coruscate inside dowdy or commonplace bodies'.⁶⁷ A. C. Ward largely agrees with this appraisal. He claims that Bennett's greatest strength is often his ability to probe and represent the thoughts and feelings of individual characters in a realistic, and therefore convincing, fashion. Ward singles out Edwin Clayhanger, the main character in Bennett's *Clayhanger* (1910), for particular comment: 'Most young Englishmen of a particular mentality experience the feelings which beset Edwin, who contributes largely to the convincingness of the book.'⁶⁸ With all of this in mind, then, it remains the case that, by penetrating individual consciousness, we are also given an insight into the mental make-up of at least some sections of society.

There has been much discussion, both during his career and since, concerning Bennett's style of writing. Most of it draws on Virginia Woolf's criticism of what she termed Bennett's 'shopkeeper's' view of literature in her 1924 essay, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown'.⁶⁹ Woolf claimed that Bennett (along with writers such as John Galsworthy and H. G. Wells) relied far too heavily on descriptions of material and social environment, thereby ignoring what she claimed was the author's fundamental task of portraying the innerness of a character. Since this condemnation, there has been much debate as to the merit of her argument. It has

⁶⁶ Carey, p. 174.

⁶⁷ Carey, p. 164.

⁶⁸ A. C. Ward, *Twentieth-Century English Literature 1901-1960*, Methuen, London, 1966, pp. 39-40.

⁶⁹ Virginia Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', in *Collected Essays I*, Hogarth Press, London, 1966, pp. 319-337.

been largely agreed that her essay on Bennett probably had some effect in influencing his reputation among her peers, but there is little to suggest that it did any damage to his popularity among the general readership of the time.⁷⁰ Indeed, as Irving Howe remarks, this view of Bennett as the shopkeeper's novelist is hardly damning. In fact, such a position has its own rewards, for Bennett, he argues,

is a master of the middle range of life and literature, neither soarings of sublimity nor plunges into the soul. He is indeed the prosing poet of the shopkeepers (who may also deserve a poet of their own).⁷¹

The reason for very briefly mentioning Woolf's criticism, apart from assisting to establish his contemporary reputation as an author, is to help explain Bennett's style of observing and of writing – and therefore the way in which I will employ his insights. The benefit of his novels to historians is only enhanced, rather than diminished, by the fact that he often places his characters in very detailed and realistic physical and social settings. Bennett believed, as his fiction demonstrates, that people's emotions were shaped, even provoked, by their immediate environment. As one commentator explains:

For Bennett (who regarded himself as a socialist), people are the product of their material and social environment; the task of the novelist is, therefore, to describe that environment as precisely as possible, without passing moral or aesthetic comment.⁷²

It follows that an intimate knowledge of their environment inevitably leads to intimacy with their thoughts and feelings.⁷³ As John Lucas comments, Bennett's

⁷⁰ See Irving Howe 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Woolf: Late Justice for One of Modernism's Victims', *The New Republic*, vol. 202, no. 23, 1990, pp. 26-29 for a more detailed discussion of Woolf's criticisms.

⁷¹ Howe, p. 26.

⁷² See Kemp, Mitchell and Trotter, entry on 'Arnold Bennett'.

⁷³ Howe, for example, comments that Woolf criticised Bennett's practice of presenting a house – thereby indicating that there must be a person living there. 'For a writer like Bennett, however, imagining a house was part of the way to locate "a person living there".' (Howe, p. 27.) John Lucas also insists that Woolf was wrong to assume that Bennett's style of writing meant that he did

ability to ‘communicate a sense of place’, the ‘dense particularity’ with which his characters are ‘socially placed’, allows him to convince his readers about the ‘texture’ of their lives.⁷⁴ Consequently, in this thesis, Bennett’s detailed descriptions of outer environment will often be called on to illustrate a character’s innerness. To take the example of domesticity, for instance, Bennett’s frequent descriptions of domestic settings, and sometimes domestic technological innovations, are referred to in order to provide support for the importance of a female character’s particular sense of usefulness and self-worth.⁷⁵ This is certainly an important facet of the process by which Bennett’s contemporary audience would have accessed and understood his characters’ thoughts and feelings.

Arnold Bennett well understood the literary world of turn-of-the-century England.⁷⁶ He participated and to a great degree succeeded in many aspects of this increasingly commercially-focused world. He knew the diverse reading

not know what was going on inside his characters’ heads. (Lucas, *Arnold Bennett. A Study of His Fiction*, p. 12.)

⁷⁴ Indeed, Lucas believes, in particular reference to one of Bennett’s most respected novels, *The Old Wives’ Tale* (1908), that ‘the real success comes from the way in which Bennett slowly builds the solidity of the world he is writing about’. He continues: ‘Bennett is supreme among English novelists in his ability to communicate this sense of place, of domestic interiors, streets, squares, parks, railway stations, shops, pubs, chapels, theatres. That may seem faint praise, but I intend no damnation. It is the achievement of a considerable novelist to be able to convince one about the texture of his characters’ lives.’ (Lucas, p. 101.) A. C. Ward, in arguing that no purely naturalistic author exists (for the whole process of selecting and translating lived experience to a text means that a writer cannot be wholly faithful to reality) and in pointing out that Bennett’s insistence on seeing the ‘wonderment of life’ in everything further removes him from ‘realism’, nevertheless adds that this popular author did attempt to reach a near faithful representation of life – leaving the audience to decide on how to view or judge the subjects or issues at hand. (Ward, p. 35.)

⁷⁵ This is discussed in greater detail in the chapter ‘The Business of Domesticity’ later in the thesis.

⁷⁶ McDonald illustrates that Bennett certainly understood the contemporary literary world through articles that he wrote, especially those for the *Academy*, analysing the reading public and the growing production machine. He knew the new literary market intimately. (McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*, chapter 2.) Bennett also wrote guides such as the humorous *The Truth About How to Become an Author*, Methuen, London, 1914; and *Literary Taste: How to Form it, with Detailed Instructions for Collecting a Complete Library of English Literature*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1938. Furthermore, Arthur Waugh, writing about the publishing firm that first published Bennett’s *The Old Wives’ Tale*, Chapman and Hall, claims that Bennett made it his business to know about other authors – he generally knew about other writers’ sales, for example. (Arthur Waugh, *A Hundred Years of Publishing, Being the Story of Chapman and Hall, Ltd*, Chapman and Hall, London, 1930, p. 210.)

public and he catered to many of their wants and needs. In Peter McDonald's words, he 'played' the literary field.⁷⁷

The epitome of the twentieth-century professional writer, Bennett had published by the time of his death thirty-seven novels, seven collections of short stories, fifteen plays, thirteen works of non-fiction, an autobiography, four volumes of essays, five volumes of letters, five travel books, and three volumes of journals.⁷⁸

His status as a 'prolific and influential book reviewer' only serves to further illustrate his awareness of – indeed familiarity with – the turn-of-the-century publishing world. Indeed, even by Edwardian standards, that is to say, at a time when the literary scene was extremely active and diverse, Bennett was viewed as 'an exceptionally versatile' writer.⁷⁹

Bennett is generally regarded to be more a respected middlebrow author than a sensationally bestselling writer, but he did know the market well enough to also be referred to as a minor bestseller. As he himself claims, he could write sensational formula fiction when he needed to.⁸⁰ His popularity and corresponding financial success in such diverse endeavours recommends the use of his fiction as providing valuable historical insights.

It is extremely difficult to access precise sales figures for Bennett's novels. However, we can get an idea of his growing popularity by very looking briefly at

⁷⁷ McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*. The title of his second chapter is 'Playing the Field: Arnold Bennett as Novelist, Serialist and Journalist'.

⁷⁸ See Kemp, Mitchell and Trotter, entry on 'Arnold Bennett'. As further example of Bennett's recognised status as a professional writer in an age when the professional writer was a relatively new concept, John Lucas, in his study of Bennett's novels, entitles his second chapter, 'The Professional'. See Lucas, *Arnold Bennett. A Study of His Fiction*.

⁷⁹ See Kemp, Mitchell and Trotter, entry on 'Arnold Bennett'.

⁸⁰ For example, he once announced to his friend George Sturt, 'I believe I could fart sensational fiction now.' (Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study. A Social History of the English Novel, 1875-1914*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1989, pp. 84-85.) Carey adds to this discussion of Bennett's popularity. He claims that Bennett aimed to 'narrow the abyss between highbrow and lowbrow'. In order to do so, he had to find a social theme that crossed all intelligence and cultural levels – his common theme, that running through most of his more 'serious' literature, being 'youth and age'. (Carey, p. 167.)

part of his publishing history. *A Man From the North* (1898), for which Bennett made only one sovereign, represented his first attempt to become a serious 'literary artist'. However, almost immediately, he made the decision to challenge the literary hierarchy by writing purely for commercial gain – seven months after his first novel appeared, for instance, Bennett began writing 'sensational serials' for money.⁸¹ His increasing command over the literary market was such that he could finance the writing of his more serious novels with the earnings received from his more sensational serial publications. In October 1898, for example, he left for a time the writing of what was to be *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902) to write *Love and Life* – what he in his letters referred to as 'an uncompromising high-coloured blood and thunder sensational serial'. He sold it to a serial fiction syndicate for £75, and it was later published in the magazine, *Hearth and Home*, in 1900. Bennett's second major serial, *The Grand Babylon Hotel*, was enormously successful. It was sold to the popular London-based national weekly, *Golden Penny*, in 1901.⁸² This then appeared in book form, published by Chatto and Windus, in 1902 – receiving critical praise from publications such as the *Spectator* and the new *Times Literary Supplement*. The novel immediately went into a second edition.⁸³ Over Bennett's lifetime, it sold 50,000 copies in hardback, and by 1904 had been translated into French, German, Italian and Swedish⁸⁴ – an assured commercial success, considering that it was generally accepted at the time that a book had to reach a sales figure of approximately 50,000 copies before it

⁸¹ Bennett's first novel, *A Man From the North* (1898), was published by John Lane (publisher of the *Yellow Book*) and sold at a relatively inexpensive 3s 6d price. Lane probably only had 750 copies produced which meant that Bennett stood to make, at the most, £7 from a 3s 6d novel. In fact, he only made one sovereign. The contract that Bennett agreed to for this novel, in December 1897, stood to see him collect a 5 per cent royalty on the first 2000 copies sold in Britain and 2 and a half per cent on USA sales. (McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*, pp. 77-78.)

⁸² The success of *The Grand Babylon Hotel* made Bennett's name as a serialist. (McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*, p. 84.)

⁸³ McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*, p. 81.

⁸⁴ Carey, p. 154; Drabble, p. 79 and p. 84; and McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*, p. 78. Some of the novels of both Bennett and Corelli were published for overseas markets and, therefore, were read by people other than those who more obviously shared similar backgrounds and values with the authors themselves. But, the specific kind of light that these novels shed on the values and attitudes of these overseas readers is not of concern in this thesis and so this complex issue will not be addressed here.

could be referred to as a ‘best-seller’.⁸⁵ Bennett also wrote other pieces of fiction, one being *Teresa of Watling Street* (1904), specifically aimed at allowing himself enough of an income to get on with other, more serious, writing.⁸⁶ John Lucas asserts that *The Card* was one of the author’s best-known and most popular works of fiction,⁸⁷ but it is novels such as *The Old Wives’ Tale* (1908) and *Clayhanger* (1910) that have brought Bennett most critical acclaim. For example, Margaret Drabble reports that *Clayhanger* was excellently received at the time of its publication – and that it went into a second edition in one month as well as selling well in America.⁸⁸

Bennett certainly achieved the heights of a popular author and the reputation of a well-known public figure by the time of his death in 1931. Drabble, a major biographer, uses his earnings as indication of this status. She writes that Bennett’s income in 1900 was £620; by the end of his career he was earning £50 per day.⁸⁹ She continues with the claim that although Bennett was popular, he never produced ‘a goldmine in the form of a steady big seller’ (like H. G. Wells’s *Outline of History*). It was this popularity, she argues, that was to turn against him after he died:

In literary terms, it was almost inevitable that his reputation should decline. He had been a popular writer: his popularity was certain to turn against him.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Keating, *The Haunted Study*, p. 424.

⁸⁶ Drabble, p. 84. It is unnecessary for me to detail a large proportion of Bennett’s literary decisions and successes here. However, for those interested see McDonald’s chapter on Bennett in his book, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*, or his article, ‘Bringing the Text to Book: John Lane and the Making of Arnold Bennett?’, *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, vol. 90, no. 1, 1996, pp. 49-68.

⁸⁷ Lucas, *Arnold Bennett. A Study of his Fiction*, p. 123.

⁸⁸ Drabble, p. 179. Although it is argued that Bennett produced much of his best fiction before the war, his popularity did continue (even if somewhat inconsistently) past the war and into the 1920s. *These twain* (the third part of the *Clayhanger* trilogy), for example, sold 13,350 copies in the first week of its release. *Imperial Palace* (1930) sold 100,000 copies in America. (Drabble, pp. 221 and 352.)

⁸⁹ Drabble, p. 117. For a more detailed breakdown of Bennett’s income, see McDonald’s chapter on Bennett in his book, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*.

⁹⁰ Drabble, p. 355. Bennett’s literary reputation may have suffered a decline after his death (whether due to his popularity or to Virginia Woolf’s criticisms of his style of writing as Irving Howe believes: ‘From the suave but deadly attack of “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” Bennett’s

Yet, it is not only Bennett's popularity, but also his particular focus on and insights into the lives of 'ordinary' women, that recommend him to a history of women's emotions. It is widely acknowledged that Bennett's writings frequently follow closely the interior lives of outwardly unremarkable women. Of *Hilda Lessways* (1911), for example, Anita Miller comments: 'This novel continues Bennett's strong interest in the psychological situation of women.'⁹¹ How, then, was Bennett positioned to observe and analyse the many and varied experiences that women of his era often found themselves in?

It was the path that his adult life took that prepared him to be a particularly sound observer as far as women were concerned. In 1893, he obtained the post of assistant editor for the weekly magazine, *Woman* – a magazine that Peter McDonald describes as 'a cautiously 'advanced' penny weekly whose motto was 'Forward! But Not Too Fast!''⁹² By 1896 he was the chief editor.⁹³ Such an occupation allowed him access, not only to popular taste (which aided his novel writing), but also to women's thoughts and ideas – into their desires, expectations and anxieties.⁹⁴ The magazine published a considerable quantity of household advice, and, as Margaret Drabble and Clotilde De Stasio both claim, this information was not lost on him.⁹⁵ It gave him an insight into his female

literary reputation never quite recovered. He remained popular with the general public, but among literary readers, the sort that became the emerging modernists, the standard view has long been that he was a middling, plodding sort of Edwardian writer whose work has been pushed aside by the revolutionary achievements of Lawrence, Joyce, and to a smaller extent Woolf herself'. (Howe, p. 26.). However, many of Bennett's novels still continue to be published. *Anna of the Five Towns* was published by Wordsworth Classics as late as the 1990s, and the Clayhanger trilogy was reprinted as late as 2000 by Penguin Classics.

⁹¹ Miller, p. 25.

⁹² Bennett obtained the post of assistant editor in 1893, and started on New Year's Day, 1894. (Drabble, p. 55; and McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*, p. 69.) This thesis concentrates, like Carey, on Bennett's novels, rather than his journalism and serial publications. For a discussion of how far this motto was appropriate for *Woman*, see chapter 12 'Forward But Not Too Fast': The Advanced Magazine?' in Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine, 1800-1914*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996.

⁹³ Drabble, p. 56.

⁹⁴ Drabble, p. 78.

⁹⁵ Drabble, p. 56. De Stasio argues that Bennett's experience on *Woman* helped him to write with 'sympathy' and 'detail' on domestic concerns in his novels, especially in such novels as *Anna of*

characters and their domestic preoccupations, which is why, for example, Bennett could paint such a complete picture of the domesticated Constance Povey in *The Old Wives' Tale*. Working on this journal allowed Bennett a platform from which to test out his own, sometimes more advanced, ideas concerning women.⁹⁶ Moreover, this experience also supplied him with ideas that he could incorporate into the creation of his own fictional characters. The approximate make-up of the readership of *Woman* gives some idea of the type of everyday concerns that Bennett would have found himself exposed to, and been involved with, during his time working for the paper – and on which he could construct his detailed and convincing descriptions of ‘ordinary’ middle-class women. Mrs C. S. Peel’s ‘Household Management’ column in *Woman* indicates that

the predominantly female readership ranged from those who lived on £160 a year, rented two-roomed flats, and employed an occasional servant, to those with an annual income of £650, a house that cost £120 a year, and two permanent domestic servants who together cost £39 a year.⁹⁷

Woman offered Bennett the opportunity to enter into a wide-ranging middle-class female world in the sense mentioned above. Furthermore, working in the office of a woman’s magazine also allowed him the opportunity of coming into contact with working women, women Drabble refers to as:

the single women who were so marked a sociological feature of the time, and whose discontent fed the Suffragette movement: the typists, the secretaries, the failed Ann Veronicas who had

the Five Towns, *Hilda Lessways* and *Helen with the High Hand*. De Stasio also adds that this magazine became more domesticated, with household management remaining the editor’s main concern, as the century drew to its close. De Stasio reports that whereas one article in particular voiced concern that women were performing too many household duties, others included tips on household management. (De Stasio, pp. 41-44.) David Leake, in an article about Bennett’s ‘five towns’ (the Potteries, incidentally, consisting of six towns – a number that Bennett apparently abandoned because it did not roll off the tongue as well as five), also supports the value of Bennett’s experience editing *Woman*. Leake contends that Bennett’s experience writing articles on Paris fashions, cookery, and diverse domestic topics for this magazine enabled him to acquire ‘an assurance about feminine clothing, ways and psychology that was to stand him in good stead as an author.’ (David Leake, ‘Arnold Bennett: The Literary Giant of the Five Towns Whose Genius Fired the Potteries with Pride’, *This England*, Autumn, 1995, pp. 20-23, p. 21.)

⁹⁶ Drabble, p. 58.

⁹⁷ McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*, p. 189.

broken away from middle-class homes, the overworked shorthand girls who had worked their way up out of the shirt factories.⁹⁸

And it was from these women that Bennett derived much material on which to model many of his female protagonists – most especially Hilda Lessways (*Hilda Lessways*, 1911).

Recalling John Carey's earlier remark about Arnold Bennett's 'Pentonville omnibus novels', John Lucas asserts, this time in reference to the other focal novelist of this thesis, Marie Corelli:

If you want to know what the man on the Clapham omnibus thought of life during those years [the last years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century], Marie Corelli's books will help to tell you.⁹⁹

The novels of Bennett and Corelli are remarkably different; however, these 'omnibus' comments carry similar implications. Bennett's novels penetrate the lives of 'ordinary' people in everyday or mundane settings, whereas Corelli's explore extraordinary situations often in exotic surroundings. Nevertheless, the works of both of these novelists can be used, in varying ways, to access the worldviews of everyday or 'omnibus' people – 'ordinary' members of the general reading public, despite living on different bus routes.

Corelli's claim to be used as a major source in this thesis is based on her reputation as a writer of often phenomenal bestselling success. Her bestselling novels are of value to historians because, as Lucas affirms and Richard Kowalczyk supports, whether or not these books are of good literary quality, they 'clearly reflect opinions, wishes, likes and dislikes that were widely current' during Corelli's lifetime. For this reason, they provide social historians today with invaluable

⁹⁸ Drabble, p. 57.

⁹⁹ John Lucas, 'Marie Corelli', in James Vinson (ed.), *Great Writers of the English Language. Novelists and Prose Writers*, Macmillan, London and Basingstoke, 1979, pp. 281-283, p. 283.

insights into the ‘common feelings, moral preferences, and psychological needs’ generally inherent in English popular culture at the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁰

Born in London in 1855, Corelli (pseudonym for Mary Mackay) studied music before turning to writing in 1885 (her first novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, being published in 1886). Corelli’s staggering popularity had begun to wane in the years leading up to the First World War, although she still continued to publish fiction, and a growing volume of non-fiction, up until her death in 1924.¹⁰¹

According to one of her most recent biographers, Brian Masters, Corelli reigned as the bestselling writer in the world for almost thirty years, during which time at least thirty of the novels she published were ‘world best-sellers’.¹⁰² It is agreed generally that she broke all publishing records by selling an average of 100,000 copies of her books per year.¹⁰³ Indeed, at the turn of the twentieth century it is reported that her yearly sales averaged 170,000 copies.¹⁰⁴ This commercial success went unrivalled during her own era.¹⁰⁵ John Lucas reaffirms the phenomenon of Corelli’s consistent bestselling status with the remark that her

¹⁰⁰ Lucas, ‘Marie Corelli’, p. 283; and Richard L. Kowalczyk, ‘In Vanished Summertime: Marie Corelli and Popular Culture’, *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1974, pp. 850-863, p. 850.

¹⁰¹ Brian Masters, *Now Barabbas Was a Rotter, The Extraordinary Life of Marie Corelli*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1978; and Lucas, ‘Marie Corelli’, pp. 281-283. Other readings on Corelli include W. S. Scott, *Corelli: The Story of a Friendship*, Hutchinson, London, 1955; Eileen Bigland, *Corelli: The Woman and the Legend*, Jarrolds, London, 1953; George Bullock, *Corelli: The Life and Death of a Best-Seller*, Constable, London, 1940; and Teresa Ransom, *Miss Marie Corelli, Queen of Victorian Bestsellers*, Sutton Publishing, Gloucestershire, 1999. Shorter readings include: ‘Corelli’ entry in Kemp, Mitchell and Trotter, p. 77; and Margaret B. McDowell, ‘Marie Corelli’, in *Dictionary of Literary Biography. Vol. 34. British Novelists, 1890-1929: Traditionalists*, Thomas F. Staley (ed.), Gale Research Company, Detroit, 1985, pp. 82-89.

¹⁰² Masters, p. 3 and p. 6.

¹⁰³ Annette R. Federico, *Idol of Suburbia. Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville and London, 2000, p. 2; and Masters, p. 6.

¹⁰⁴ Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 2.

¹⁰⁵ Even Corelli’s closest competing novelists, although they sold extremely well, did not touch her success. Hall Caine, who, at the height of his career, sold 45,000 copies per year, was Corelli’s closest rival. He was followed by the third most popular author of the time, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, who, in her best years, averaged about 35,000 copies, and then by H. G. Wells, who at the peak of his career sold approximately 15,000 novels annually. (McDowell, p. 84.) Indeed, McAleer points out that Corelli remained the highest selling female writer on the publishing firm Methuen’s books

sales make all others, even those of enormously popular writers such as Ouida and Elinor Glyn, ‘pale into insignificance’.¹⁰⁶

Corelli’s 1895 novel, *The Sorrows of Satan*, considered by many to be one of the first ever modern bestsellers, sold more copies initially than any previous English novel (even though Corelli decided not to send it out for review). By the time of Corelli’s death in 1924, *The Sorrows of Satan* was in its sixtieth edition and had been translated into almost every European language. It had also been adapted for both stage and film.¹⁰⁷ Before this, in 1893, her novel, *Barabbas*, outsold all previous Corelli novels (showing that her popularity continued to rise through the 1880s and 1890s) and went into 7 editions in just 7 months; the single-volume edition sold 10,000 copies in one week.¹⁰⁸ Hutchinson, the publisher of her 1896 novel, *The Mighty Atom*, was so sure of the book’s demand (based solely on her reputation) that it printed a first edition of 20,000 copies – an ‘enormous figure’ in this year.¹⁰⁹ There were no wasted remainders and it went on to sell over 100,000 copies.¹¹⁰ A few years later, in 1900, *The Master-Christian* reached what Federico calls ‘astonishing heights of fame’ by selling 160,000 copies in 2 years.¹¹¹ Corelli’s popularity continued into the twentieth century. In 1906, for example, her new novel, *The Treasure of Heaven: A Romance of Riches* achieved a first-day sales record of 100,000 copies; and even in 1909, when her popularity was

until her death in 1924. (Joseph McAleer, *Passion’s Fortune. The Story of Mills & Boon*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p. 14.)

¹⁰⁶ Lucas, ‘Marie Corelli’, p. 283.

¹⁰⁷ Federico claims that the novel sold 20,000 copies in one week and 50,000 in 7 weeks. (The film adaptations that she refers to were made in Britain in 1917 by G. B. Samuelson Productions and later in USA by D. W. Griffith in 1926.) (Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 7 and p. 61.) According to Peter Keating, introducing the 1996 Oxford Fiction edition of *The Sorrows of Satan*, the sales of this novel (for which he did not have precise figures) must have been extremely high for this period. ‘As a rough indication of the book’s popularity, it went through thirty-seven editions in its first three years.’ (Peter Keating, ‘Introduction’, in Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan or The Strange Experience of One Geoffrey Tempest, Millionaire. A Romance*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1996, pp. ix-xx, p. xviii.) See also Masters, p. 3; and McDowell, p. 84.

¹⁰⁸ Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁹ Masters, p. 151; and Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 7.

¹¹⁰ Masters, p. 163.

¹¹¹ Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 7. Richard Altick also refers to the enormous popularity of Corelli’s *The Master-Christian*, which, he said, had a pre-publication printing of 75,000 copies. (Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader. A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800-1900*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1963, p. 313.)

beginning to decline, her publishers sold 130,000 copies of her new book and offered her an advance of £9,500 for the next.¹¹² By contrast, and despite her reputation among the general reading public being consistently high, Corelli's relationship with contemporary literary critics was certainly less than ideal. As Sir Algernon Methuen (founder of the Methuen publishing house) commented on reviews of Corelli's latest book, *Barabbas* in 1893:

Few books in late years have received such savage and merciless treatment from the critics as Miss Corelli's latest romance.... Meanwhile the public, indifferent to the voice of the critic, and to charges of blasphemy, crowds to the sale.¹¹³

Again, as with Bennett, it is difficult to access the class and gender make-up of Corelli's vast reading public – of those readers continually crowding to the sale. Nevertheless, Federico makes an attempt to do so. She claims that Corelli's name was sometimes used to suggest the 'taste and intelligence' of the kind of person who read her books.¹¹⁴ She adds, however, that this was difficult to do considering that Corelli had no consistent reader base.¹¹⁵ Still, Federico's general belief is that, although she often spoke directly to Britain's middle classes, her readers existed across all class boundaries – that she appealed to 'all classes, to gentlewomen, shopkeepers, artists, and intellectuals'.¹¹⁶ In specific reference to *The Sorrows of Satan*, for example, she argues that the audience was both wide and varied, the novel being read by everyone from 'noblemen to scullery maids'.¹¹⁷ As for the gender make-up of her audience, again this is a question that

¹¹² Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 2 and p. 38; and Lucas, 'Marie Corelli', p. 283.

¹¹³ Maureen Duffy, *A Thousand Capricious Chances. A History of the Methuen List 1889-1989*, Methuen, London, 1989, p. 8; and McAleer, p. 24.

¹¹⁴ A casual reference to Corelli's novels in E. M. Forster's *Howard's End* (Penguin, London, 1995, pp. 54-55) provides one example of this. Referring to the culturally elitist, Margaret, Leonard Bast comments: 'For all her cleverness and culture, she was probably one of those soulless, atheistical women who have been so shown up by Miss Corelli'. Doubtless, Bast's instinctive or careless reliance on Corelli's wisdom and insight would have been understood by Forster's audience to have been revealing of his lower social origins and indicative of the lower level of his literary tastes, as well as, of course, being evidence of the durability of Corelli's widespread popularity.

¹¹⁵ Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 64.

¹¹⁶ Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 58 and p. 185.

¹¹⁷ Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 7.

is impossible to answer with any degree of certainty; yet, it is one in which Corelli herself was evidently interested. Corelli, doubtless with the stereotype of the female reader of novels in mind, claimed that men as well as women read her books. Much referred to in recent scholarship are the more exceptional examples of numerous prominent clergymen and male public figures, such as Gladstone and Tennyson, who were familiar with her novels, but, apart from these more public instances, there is little evidence enabling historians to access the mass of men or women who read her works.¹¹⁸

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Corelli was a common fixture in both the literary market and in the more general public arena at the turn of the twentieth century. Like Bennett, she knew the literary market well. In a similar fashion, she contributed to many diverse aspects of this market – not content to confine herself to the writing of novels alone. Indeed, Corelli wrote almost as much non-fiction as fiction in her lifetime – writing especially for popular women’s magazines.¹¹⁹ In a way then similar to Bennett and his links with the magazine *Woman*, Corelli had firm ties with the world of the popular press. As a result, both authors were in touch with the proliferation of literature and of popular ideas at the time – and consequently each author was qualified to gauge and serve the needs and values of the wider reading public.

Certainly, Corelli’s ongoing popularity at the end of the nineteenth century was unique and unprecedented. The introduction of a relatively new ‘mass’ audience – one increasingly willing and able to purchase various forms of entertainment, the most dominant of these forms being the novel, and the beginning of an era of mass media (including photojournalism), all facilitated the specific nature of Corelli’s

¹¹⁸ Although it is argued that women, ‘being more restricted in their activities than men, read avidly’. (Duffy, p. 43.) For details concerning these references to clergymen and to the widespread popularity of the spirituality contained within Corelli’s novels, see Margaret M. Maison, *The Victorian Vision. Studies in the Religious Novel*, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1961, pp. 330-331.

¹¹⁹ Janet Galligani Casey, ‘Marie Corelli and *Fin de Siècle* Feminism’, *English Literature in Transition*, vol. 35, no. 2, 1992, pp. 163-178, p. 170.

public status.¹²⁰ During what many commentators referred to as her reign as queen of bestsellers, Corelli managed to attain what is in present-day terms almost superstar status. According to Brian Masters, numerous contemporary reports claimed that it was not an unusual sight to see people, waiting for her latest release, form queues outside bookshops. McDowell supports this view by presenting images, plucked from the early years of the twentieth century, where:

thousands waited outside the halls where Marie Corelli lectured, and some fought to touch her gown. Even in the 1920s tourists gathered each afternoon to glimpse her as she emerged from her house at Stratford-upon-Avon.¹²¹

The effect of Corelli's popularity did not stop here. As a public voice of her period, one boasting phenomenal sales figures, there is no doubt that she contributed to widespread public debate. Further than this, her influence assumed a more obviously interactive dimension. Q. D. Leavis, in *Fiction and the Reading Public*, provides numerous examples of the use of Corelli's work by prominent members of religious institutions to promote popular religion. Most notably, the Dean of Westminster read from Corelli's novel *Barabbas* from the Abbey pulpit one Easter Sunday. Leavis further records,

Father Ignatius (described as 'a prophet in his generation') preached on The Sorrows of Satan and the hall was packed, streams of private carriages discharging far more of Marie's readers than could be accommodated so that a similar sermon had to be delivered on the following Sunday.¹²²

Moreover, apart from being used by the clergy to help reinforce the views of their own faith, Corelli occupied a very visible public stage. For example, she delivered

¹²⁰ See Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, for a detailed discussion of how Corelli went to great lengths to control her celebrity status – by exercising a degree of control over photojournalism for example – and of how, to a considerable extent she succeeded.

¹²¹ McDowell, p. 84.

¹²² Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1979 [1932], p. 137.

lectures to the Edinburgh Philosophical Society and the Royal Society of Literature.¹²³

Many twentieth-century commentators have sought to account for the huge degree of popularity enjoyed by both Corelli and her fiction. Kowalczyk, for example, argues that it was not only the strength of her romances that attracted such a vast number of readers – the romance genre being common among many popular authors of the time – but also her overwhelming spiritual espousals – and her delving into alternative worlds.¹²⁴ Corelli herself supports such a suggestion. In her novels, she claimed to provide ‘a relief from the horrible “realities” of life that sicken and weary one’s soul.’¹²⁵ Indeed, her relief was much sought after. Her many novels wrestled with what numerous contemporary social commentators perceived to be the spiritual and moral degradation of their modern society. In the face of increasing challenges to religious belief, late-nineteenth-century English society witnessed an increased demand for spiritual reassurance – a reassurance exemplified in the world of literature by ‘a vogue for religious novels’.¹²⁶ Corelli inspired ‘fierce loyalty’ in her readers, hungry for comforting moral solace, partly because she offered them this reassurance:

Thousands of discontented people, worried sick by the new scepticism born of modern scientific advance, were reassured by this unknown lady who spoke to them with missionary zeal. Of course she made them feel better; she demanded no great mental effort, and promised easy assuagement of their ills.¹²⁷

She offered her readers not only romance, but also the warmth of an imaginary world where her fantastic, albeit one-dimensional, leading characters acted as crusaders – fighting against the ‘degrading influence of the real world’.¹²⁸

¹²³ Leavis, p. 137.

¹²⁴ Kowalczyk, p. 850.

¹²⁵ Masters, p. 30. For an extended discussion of Corelli’s provision of spiritual relief, see chapter 6 ‘Spirituality and Religion’.

¹²⁶ Masters, p. 80. See also Robert Lee Wolff, *Gains and Losses. Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England*, John Murray, New York, 1977, p. 1-2.

¹²⁷ Masters, pp. 59-60.

¹²⁸ Masters, p. 30.

Although Corelli's fiction did not completely ignore the changing social and moral attitudes evident in a transitional turn-of-the-century society, to a large extent, it did embody many of the traditional moral virtues espoused during the Victorian period.¹²⁹ In fact, and especially after Queen Victoria sent for copies of all Corelli's books, the author was regarded by many of her English readers to be 'in some way the literary counterpart of their own dear Queen.'¹³⁰ Through the eyes of her vast and loyal audience she became the protector of moral and spiritual hope. She fulfilled her role as the self-appointed 'guardian of the public conscience.'¹³¹

However, her continual espousals of spiritual and traditional moral ideals do not override her desire to portray the more sensational and sinful dimensions of life. In specific reference to *The Sorrows of Satan*, Maureen Duffy maintains that, even though Corelli railed against the morally dubious and controversial New Woman figure, she 'nevertheless raised the emotional temperature to a lurid pitch of unsatisfied and therefore constantly itching desire which is simply that lust she so often condemns'.¹³² It is certainly likely, therefore, that Corelli was as known for her portrayals of decadence as for her condemnation of this decadence. It then follows that these very opposing images together helped to form the basis of her widespread popularity. As Federico points out, if Corelli was the 'idol of suburbia' (as she argues she is), she wrote for suburbanites who not only wanted her unique form of moral reassurance, but also desired a look at an immoral world – they sought both 'sensationalism and safety'.¹³³

¹²⁹ Kowalczyk, although he recognises Corelli's value as an astute observer of her era, does seem, on a number of occasions, to reduce her work simply to espousals of traditional Victorian ideals. That is to say, he does not, in any obvious fashion, take into account that her novels often do incorporate changing social and moral attitudes evident in a society moving from the nineteenth into the twentieth century. For example, although Corelli firmly advocates a continued support of the ideal of female sexual purity (while, it must be said, allowing her readers to indulge in displays of female sexual impurity), she strongly promotes the idea of female intellectual equality (albeit equality in the realm of artistic endeavour rather than, say, politics or finances). See Kowalczyk, pp. 850-863.

¹³⁰ Masters, p. 107.

¹³¹ Masters, p. 10.

¹³² Duffy, p. 10.

¹³³ Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 68.

As for the appeal of Corelli's position with regard to women, Janet Galligani Casey argues that what we today may consider to be highly inconsistent and indeed 'highly contradictory' attitudes towards the role of women on the part of Corelli, are more likely to have been viewed as compromises during her own

lifetime. Casey points out that these apparent contradictions simply reflected the general confusion concerning the nature and status of women prevailing at the end of the nineteenth century.¹³⁴ Corelli's inconsistent views reflect the fact that she was writing in a time when, in the face of often competing and conflicting ideas about, among other things, separate spheres, sexuality, and female intellectual capabilities, women 'managed simultaneously to hold conflicting views of themselves: sometimes they were man's equal, other times his inferior, and still others his superior'.¹³⁵ However, Casey's argument is that a portion of Corelli's popularity was attributable to the way in which she treated the whole 'woman question' – especially at a time when the New Woman debates were rife. She claims that Corelli gave her public exactly what they wanted – 'the illusion of a feminist spirit couched in a fundamentally conventional Victorian ideology'.¹³⁶ As will be seen in the chapters that follow, for the most part this thesis takes a similar point of view to that adopted by Casey on Corelli's treatment of the position of women – even if it sometimes regards Corelli's 'feminist' or 'progressive' sentiments as more authentic than illusory.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Casey, p. 164. Federico argues along similar lines to Casey. Federico points out, for example, that while Corelli opposed female suffrage and the New Woman, she promoted the intellectual and financial independence of women. See Annette R. Federico, "'An 'Old-Fashioned' Young Woman": Marie Corelli and the New Woman', in Nicola Diane Thompson (ed.), *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 241-259, p. 241.

¹³⁵ Casey, p. 172.

¹³⁶ Casey, p. 166.

¹³⁷ The bulk of this thesis attempts to confine itself to a reading of Corelli's novels, and therefore her audience's desires and expectations, only stepping outside of those novels when introducing and explaining her place in her contemporary literary world. By contrast, Federico's study combines an examination of Corelli's texts with a look at her life outside her novels – that is to say, her role as a female writer in a male dominated literary world. As a result, Federico argues that Corelli, who can often be read today as a writer who confirms conservative female stereotypes, was actually a writer who both confirmed and challenged or subverted those stereotypes. Corelli's

Arguing for the use of Corelli's novels as evidence for the historian certainly involves a different kind of approach than that required for those written by Arnold Bennett. Corelli's popularity was greater than that of Bennett, but it was also comparatively short-lived – implying that she articulated the immediate basic needs and desires of a general Late Victorian and Edwardian reading public more so than Bennett. Bennett's fiction, on the other hand, attains longevity in the literary world because it expresses more lasting 'truths' than Corelli's. In addition, whereas Corelli's works involve little characterisation, relying instead on a more superficially based story-telling mode, Bennett's works penetrate deeper into the characters they portray, calling, in turn, for a closer, less superficial reading of his novels.

In most of her novels, Corelli plays the role of preacher, leading her readers so completely that there is no room for choice. Her principal 'good' characters are so 'good' that they cannot be argued with and her villains are so obviously 'bad' that it is morally impossible to side with them. In fact, as Masters points out, the heroes and villains of her novels are more deserving to be referred to as 'figures' rather than actual characters.¹³⁸ Doubtless this helps partly to explain why McDowell finds it difficult to appreciate Corelli's literary success. While admitting that Corelli 'enjoyed popular success and was praised by the famous as well as the masses', McDowell, presumably reading with the mind of a late-twentieth-century critic, finds that the reasons for Corelli's success remain 'in part,

manoeuvres within the literary and publishing world, although they may help demonstrate her knowledge of the general reading public and the requirements of contemporary popular fiction, do not necessarily enlighten social historians wishing to understand the extent of Corelli's appeal. Therefore, even though many of my own interpretations of Corelli's works agree with some of those put forward by Federico, it is important to point out that, in contrast to Federico's book (which looks at Corelli as both a 'cultural icon' as well as a 'barometer of Victorian taste'), Corelli's fiction is of more importance to the aims of this particular study than her life outside of this work – a life of which her audience was likely to have had distanced, but perhaps not close, knowledge.

¹³⁸ 'Marie Corelli has no time for characterisation, with the result that all her heroines resemble each other, as do all her villains. Since the former are extensions of herself, and the latter expressions of her timeless prejudice, it matters not that they do not develop or mature; neither did their creator.' (Masters, p. 13.)

obscure'.¹³⁹ She accounts for what, to many modern readers, is justifiably a sense of puzzlement and bewilderment, by summing up Corelli's chief traits:

Her books were outrageously overwritten – every page loaded with adjectives, adverbs, assorted clichés, archaisms, and repetitions. Her novels were far longer than those of her contemporaries, and her readers seemed not to skip the long, unbroken pages of description; in fact, many admirers memorized the passages they found uplifting, poetic, and filled with “lovely pictures.” Her scolding rhetoric rose almost to hysteria on such subjects as women who smoked or rode bicycles, Parisians who drank and read cheap novels, socialists, suffragists, and Carnegie libraries.¹⁴⁰

This apparent moral inflexibility is itself revealing of one aspect of the collective state of mind of her vast audience – an audience indubitably seeking stability or reassurance. Corelli's didacticism and lack of characterisation, therefore, necessitates examining her choice of subjects or issues, the recurring themes, the outcomes of her storylines – an approach that surely reveals more about the broader concerns of the reading public than about their intensely personal or private emotions.¹⁴¹

Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli's value to historians relies initially on the levels of popularity that they each achieved. Available sales figures help to demonstrate their commercial success. But, in an area of research as elusive as this, the extent of their contemporary influence can also be determined by individual instances of contemporary commentators casually referring to or remarking on Bennett and Corelli's respective levels of fame. For example, in E. F. Benson's *As We Were*, his memoirs of Victorian and Edwardian England, he refers to Corelli's 'taint of

¹³⁹ McDowell, p. 85.

¹⁴⁰ McDowell, p. 85.

¹⁴¹ Chapter 2 'Using Fiction as a Historical Source' analyses the historian's approach to using fiction in much more detail.

popularity'.¹⁴² Moreover, the fact that Benson models two of his fictional characters in his novel, *Secret Lives* (1932), on Bennett and Corelli is surely indicative of the level of fame that each of these very recognisable turn-of-the-century personalities managed to achieve.¹⁴³ And, as has been seen, such was Corelli's recognised standing in society that numerous members of the clergy during the Late Victorian and Edwardian period called on her novels in order to illustrate various aspects of their sermons. Even Bennett himself wrote on Corelli's popularity in his book, *Fame and Fiction*.¹⁴⁴

As for Bennett, his astute, well-founded observations concerning his own level of popularity and the make-up of his readership serve to confirm the influence that he had on his contemporary society.¹⁴⁵ As for his contemporaries, Rebecca West, in an article entitled 'Uncle Bennett' published in 1931, declared:

Yet the man is great. We must, indeed, count him as one of the
Uncles of the English-speaking world who have more influence

¹⁴² E. F. Benson, *As We Were. A Victorian Peepshow*, Hogarth Press, London, 1985 [1930], p. 253. Illustrating Corelli's immense popularity, Benson writes: 'Modern art became so popular, that perhaps what Edmund Gosse (speaking of the work of Miss Marie Corelli) once called 'the taint of popularity' was partly responsible for its decay. Yet the fact that an artist is popular need not necessarily imply that he is worthless, any more than the fact that an artist is not thus tainted is a proof that he has distinction, and Miss Corelli possibly had this in her mind when she replied to Mr. Gosse's criticism by pointing out that though her works might be tainted with popularity, no one could offer such an unfavourable comment on his.'

¹⁴³ In the 'Introduction' to Benson's *As We Were*, T. J. Binyon confirms this: 'In *Secret Lives* (1932) the novelist heroine, Susan Leg, who writes under the name of Rudolph da Vinci, is obviously closely modelled on Marie Corelli, and Arthur Armstrong, the critic who eats her dinners but reviles her books, on Arnold Bennett.' (T. J. Binyon, 'Introduction', in E. F. Benson, *As We Were. A Victorian Peepshow*, Hogarth Press, London, 1985 [1930], p. iii.) As referred to earlier, also see E. M. Forster, *Howard's End*, Penguin, London, 1995, pp. 54-55 for reference to Corelli.

¹⁴⁴ Arnold Bennett, *Fame and Fiction. An Enquiry into Certain Popularities*, Books for Libraries Press, Plainview, New York, 1975 [1901], pp. 83-96.

¹⁴⁵ For example, McDonald comments: 'Writing in the *New Age* in 1909, he [Bennett] acknowledged that the chief purchasers of his novels were the circulating libraries which included Mudie's, the *Times* Book Club, and W. H. Smith's. Their patrons, he guessed, came mostly from the 375,000 income-tax payers of 1908 who represented an estimated one million members of the 'prosperous' middle classes. He recognized a much vaster 'potential public' in the lower-middle class, but he thought the 'great majority of my readers must be somewhere in this million'. Characterized by political conservatism, 'temperamental dullness', and a lofty sense of their own social superiority, these readers were simply 'the enemies of art and progress'. But they were also undeniably part of the literary field, he claimed, and, for the avant-garde novelist, they were 'a great actuality, like war'.' (McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*, pp. 93-94.) Carey supports the contention that Bennett had identified 'the lower middle

on innumerable young people than anybody else save their fathers and mothers; who fix thereby the colour of their times.¹⁴⁶

In a very different vein, there is Virginia Woolf's comment (mentioned earlier but relevant here), in which she indicts his position as a 'middlebrow' one and condemns what she calls his 'shopkeeper's' view of literature.¹⁴⁷ Whether praising his literary achievements and influence or criticising his approach to writing, these comments, made by his peers, certainly help to underline the extent to which he had an impact on his era.

The fact that Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli had the impact that they did depended critically on the changed character of the literary scene at the turn of the twentieth century. Obviously the level of literary success that they both achieved depended on what their novels had to say. But the extent of their impact was also facilitated by the professional context in which they operated. Bennett and Corelli were among the first novelists to benefit from a much wider circulation of published material and from exposure to an expanded audience – features which marked the new literary landscape and marketplace at the end of the nineteenth century. Considering the significance of these changing conditions to the position and popularity of Bennett and Corelli, it is pertinent to glance, however briefly, at this turn-of-the-century publishing world and to help explain how such unprecedented levels of popularity were even possible.

Indubitably, the main factor contributing towards the impact that Bennett and Corelli had on turn-of-the-century society, and therefore towards their value to historians of *mentalité*, was the expansion of the reading public. It is generally agreed that Late Victorian and Edwardian observers believed that they were experiencing a massive swell in the general reading public – a perception that

classes, especially in the industrial Midlands and the north' as 'the great potential reading public.' (Carey, pp. 155-156.)

¹⁴⁶ Rebecca West, 'Uncle Bennett', in *The Strange Necessity. Essays and Reviews*, Jonathon Cape, London and Toronto, 1931, pp. 199-214, p. 205.

¹⁴⁷ Woolf, pp. 319-337.

many late twentieth-century scholars validate.¹⁴⁸ This is not to say that a relatively large audience had not been in existence before the last decades of the nineteenth century. It had. But, as Richard Altick argues, earlier Victorian publishers had failed to recognise the potential of this rising audience as a source of profit, and therefore, had failed to serve it – except for producing publications such as ‘broadside ballads, easy-to-read chapbooks, and other street literature’ for their consumption.¹⁴⁹ Serving this newly acknowledged expanding reading public, then, became a focal task for many authors and publishing bodies at the turn of the twentieth century.

Accessing the make-up of the general reading public today is a difficult task; accessing it at the turn of the century is even more challenging. Even those intimately involved with the literary and publishing scene at the turn of the twentieth century were not certain about the composition of this recently expanded reading public, nor about their reading preferences.¹⁵⁰ However, a number of scholars, including Richard Altick, Peter Keating and Timothy Wager, agree that the growing middle classes supplied a substantial proportion of this expanding readership.¹⁵¹ Altick, for example, argues that this new audience largely emerged, earlier in the nineteenth century, from among skilled workers, that is, from among those such as the ‘small shopkeepers, clerks, and the better grade of domestic servants’ and, later in the century, from among the growing sector of more highly

¹⁴⁸ Carey, p. 5; and K. Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, pp. 381–386 (who refers to the growth in the reading public before the 1880s). For more detail on the number of readers before 1870, see J. A. Sutherland, *Victorian Novelists and Publishers*, The Athlone Press, London, 1976.

¹⁴⁹ Richard D. Altick, ‘Publishing’, in Herbert F. Tucker (ed.), *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, Blackwell, Malden, Massachusetts, 1999, pp. 189–304, p. 289.

¹⁵⁰ In reference to the editors of popular magazines – those who had the task of choosing which fiction to serialise amid the growing market for serialised fiction – McDonald claims: ‘In the absence of any reliable knowledge and in an age before market surveys, they had, like the aspiring serialist, to rely mainly on their wits and experience in the field, and, where possible, on a vague idea of what the tastes of some ‘average reader’ might be.’ (McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880–1914*, pp. 108–109.)

¹⁵¹ Altick, *The English Common Reader*, p. 83; Keating, *The Haunted Study*, p. 437; and Wager, p. 183.

skilled workers, teachers, civil servants and other professional workers.¹⁵² However, the role that class played in the nation's choice of reading material is uncertain. As Keating points out, class distinctions within the general reading public did not necessarily reflect reading tastes:

It was a secret long known to the circulating libraries – given the choice, most readers, regardless of class, would prefer Ouida to George Eliot, Mrs Henry Wood to Thackeray. There really should have been no surprise early in the twentieth century when readers overwhelmingly plumped for Elinor Glyn rather than Conrad, or Florence Barclay rather than Virginia Woolf.¹⁵³

The preference for many novels, doubtless those of Bennett and Corelli included, crossed social classes.

Gender played a role in contemporary appraisals of this enlarged reading public. Not only are most of the novels studied within this thesis centred around women, but at the turn of the twentieth century it was also perceived that many of these novels would have been consumed by young women readers in particular. Charles Boon, when establishing the publishing house, Mills & Boon (initially a general publishing house before converting to one specialising in romance fiction), recognised that, in order to be a commercial success, he would have to pay special attention to the tastes of a particular vast section of the general reading public – women. In 1913, he agreed with a declaration by the popular writer, Hall Caine, to the effect that if anyone in the bookselling industry wanted to get an idea of how the wider, general public was going to react to a novel, they should first try it on a

¹⁵² Of the latter group, Altick comments: 'These people, because of the special requirements of their daily work as well as the general cultural tradition of the professional class, constituted an important audience for reading matter.' (Altick, *The English Common Reader*, p. 83.) Wager asserts that by the end of the nineteenth century a majority of the population could read – the literary marketplace during this period, then, being 'dominated in numbers by the recently-educated lower-middle classes, whose relatively low level of reading ability was still high enough to make their opinions a force to be reckoned with'. (Wager, p. 183.) See also, Per Gedin, *Literature in the Marketplace*, translated by George Bisset, Faber, London, 1977, p. 14. Both Altick and Gedin further point out that those from the lower classes of society were not likely to have formed a substantial portion of the novel-reading public given their generally poor state of housing, overcrowding, bad lighting, sheer fatigue, and some levels of illiteracy. (Altick, pp. 90-93; and Gedin, p. 14.)

woman.¹⁵⁴ Boon claimed, in conversation with a representative of *The Daily Citizen*: 'I am certain that to-day the bulk of novels published are devoured by women before they reach the men'. He added that he was also certain that the great majority of the readers borrowing from the circulating libraries were women, and that often it was female readers who influenced the reading tastes of the men around them (while he also acknowledged the influence of newspaper criticisms).¹⁵⁵

Kate Flint's book on 'the woman reader' certainly agrees that a large proportion of fiction of the Victorian and Edwardian eras was published with a specifically female audience, principally a young female audience, in mind.¹⁵⁶ The particularly gendered nature of reading a novel was illustrated through the frequent warnings that were issued regarding the immoral nature of much fiction – especially as it affected impressionable young female minds (implying that fiction was believed to have a different effect on women than on men).¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, the reading of novels was often likened to a perceived notion of women taking part in 'gossip' or in 'social conversations'.¹⁵⁸ All this is certainly not to deny their male readership, but only to highlight the notion that many of these novels would

¹⁵³ Keating, *The Haunted Study*, p. 437.

¹⁵⁴ McAleer, p. 29.

¹⁵⁵ McAleer, p. 29. Another contemporary commentator, Edmund Gosse, in an article entitled 'The Tyranny of the Novel', in April 1892, stated that it was his belief that the main readers of novels were young women, particularly young married women. This fact only made what he saw to be the negative influence of the proliferation of low quality novels even worse. (McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*, p. 6.)

¹⁵⁶ Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995, p. 49. Gedin also remarks that as the century wore on it became increasingly possible for more women from the middle classes to find time to read due to technological innovations that freed them from some household duties, such as, an increased production and availability of consumer goods, which cut down, for example, soap-making duties, beer brewing, spinning, weaving and candle-making. (Gedin, p. 15.) For a more detailed discussion of the technological changes affecting middle-class women, see chapter 4 'The Business of Domesticity'.

¹⁵⁷ Flint remarks, however, that especially, but by no means exclusively, after the Education Act of 1870, scrutinising attention was also paid to the reading material of working-class boys as well as working-class girls. Her book also challenges the assumption that women were passive readers – blindly accepting of what they read – arguing, rather, that they were both socially informed, self-aware, and capable of social analysis and judgement. (Flint, p. 10, p. 13 and p. 15.)

¹⁵⁸ Flint, p. 48.

have been written with a large female audience in mind, or at least that their advertisement campaigns strongly targeted this female audience.

Whatever its precise gender composition, a complex nexus of factors combined to aid the emergence of this 'new' mass audience and the accompanying rise in book sales – interrelated factors that included, among others, population growth, rising literacy rates, wider library access, increased production and decreased cost of books, and subsequently a stronger emphasis on book-buying rather than book-borrowing.

While maintaining that the 'mass reading public developed against a background of profound social change', Altick singles out population growth as one of the more fundamental influencing factors.¹⁵⁹ The fact that the population had increased, over the nineteenth century, by approximately three and a half times, meant that the 'reservoir from which the reading public was drawn' became larger and larger.¹⁶⁰

Added to this were rising levels of literacy that allowed a more substantial proportion of the population to access fiction. This thesis does not enter into any detailed discussion of literacy. That has been well-covered by scholars more qualified for the job, including Altick, Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart, and, more recently, David Vincent, Peter MacDonald and Peter Keating.¹⁶¹ It simply suffices here to say that, in spite of the many difficulties involved in calculating literacy and in tracing the precise reasons for its expansion, it is generally agreed that a far greater proportion of the population could read at the

¹⁵⁹ Altick, *The English Common Reader*, p. 81.

¹⁶⁰ Population growth accompanied, perhaps, by an increasing number of adults interested in reading. (Altick, *The English Common Reader*, p. 81.)

¹⁶¹ See Altick, *The English Common Reader*; Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1960; Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy. Aspects of Working-Class Life with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1968; David Vincent, *Literary and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989; McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*; and Keating, *The Haunted Study*, 1989.

turn of the twentieth century than at any other previous time in English history.¹⁶² Moreover, by addressing their fiction to a greater and wider audience, writers facilitated the growth of literature produced to serve the wants and desires of this growing 'mass' of readers.¹⁶³

This period witnessed the development of numerous other circumstances that aided this diffusion of fiction – conditions that allowed a greater number of people to indulge in reading. Included among these were, reduced working hours; increased availability of leisure time due to the increased availability of manufactured goods, such as pre-made food; with a general increase in the standard of living, a rising reliance on outside help, such as professional repairmen and domestic servants; better home lighting; and railway travel which afforded both the time to read and the availability of published literature through railway station bookstalls.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, it is this last factor, the spread of railway travel, that

¹⁶² Even an agreed definition of 'literacy' is difficult to attain. Each historian in this area points out the difficulty of attempting to match a precise definition to the word 'literacy'. Vincent in his 1989 study, *Literacy and Popular Culture. England 1750-1914*, believes that a definition of this term is relative to the demands and expectations of the society and time in question. That is, he believes that if an individual can engage effectively in what he terms 'all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group', then he is deserving of that title. Part of the problem of definition lies in extracting information concerning the literary demands and expectations of the society. Vincent, therefore, believes that there is little to be gained from studying literacy divorced from its context. (Vincent, p. 15.) As for tracing the origins of this rise in literacy, many point, with varying degrees of emphasis, to the education acts passed between 1870 and 1891. Raymond Williams, for example, refers to what he claims is a commonly accepted belief – a 'ready-made historical thesis' of 'popular culture'. He writes that: 'After the Education Act of 1870, a new mass-public came into being, literate but untrained in reading, low in taste and habit. The mass-culture followed as a matter of course'. (Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, p. 306.) It is now generally agreed that the impact of the 1870 Education Act on levels of literacy has been somewhat exaggerated. Still, it is acknowledged that by the end of the nineteenth century literacy skills had risen considerably. For more on this debate, see McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*, p. 7; Altick, 'Publishing', p. 290; Altick, *The English Common Reader*, p. 307; Vincent, p. 3, p. 12 and p. 17; and Keating, *The Haunted Study*, p. 400.

¹⁶³ McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*, p. 7; and Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, p. 325.

¹⁶⁴ See Altick, *The English Common Reader*, chapter 4. For more on the factors affecting the increased availability and accessibility of reading see Robert Druce, *This Day Our Daily Fictions. An Enquiry into the Multi-Million Bestseller Status of Enid Blyton and Ian Fleming*, Rodolpi, Amsterdam-Atlanta, 1992, 'Introductory' chapter.

Altick considers one of the most influential factors in the spread of reading during the nineteenth century.¹⁶⁵

The phenomenon of the ‘popular’ novel – and the spread of ‘popular’ culture – had as much to do with accessibility as ability to read. The growing number and range of libraries during the era, then, was one of the greatest contributing factors to the rising phenomenon of popular fiction. Libraries took on the role of buying enough books to provide for the rapidly expanding reading public.¹⁶⁶ And a large number of the general reading public had access to various forms of borrowing, whether through subscriptions to the circulating libraries, or to the so-called ‘free’ libraries financed by ratepayers.

Before the turn of the twentieth century, circulating libraries, such as Mudie’s Select Library, supplied a substantial proportion of the nation’s fiction, albeit morally-checked fiction, to those members of the population who could afford the subscription.¹⁶⁷ After this period, partly due to the introduction of the cheaper 6/- one-volume novel that began to replace the more expensive 31/6 three-decker, their hold on the distribution of fiction declined.¹⁶⁸ However, neither the inability to afford subscriptions to Mudie’s (or W. H. Smith’s which in 1862 began to set up book-borrowing stalls at almost every important train line, especially for middle-class commuters) nor the eventual diminishing power of Mudie’s, meant

¹⁶⁵ Altick spends considerable time explaining why the factors mentioned here are applicable mainly to the skilled labour classes and not the unskilled labour classes. For further details, see Altick, *The English Common Reader*, chapter 4.

¹⁶⁶ Keating, *The Haunted Study*, p. 422.

¹⁶⁷ Mudie’s was established by Charles Mudie in 1842. At its peak, this library had branches situated all over London and had connections in almost every provincial town. (Cruse, *The Victorians and Their Books*, p. 332.) The minimum subscription to Mudie’s was £1.1s.0d, (that is a guinea) a year, which enabled the borrowing of one volume per visit. The next subscription was for £2.2s.0d a year, for up to 4 volumes at any one time. A 2 guinea subscriber could afford as many three-deckers a year as they wanted – for little more than the official price of one of them. (Keating, *The Haunted Study*, p. 23.) Its clientele was predominantly middle-class. (See Keating, *The Haunted Study*, p. 23; and Amy Cruse, *The Victorians and Their Books*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1962 [1935], pp. 311-12.) For a much more detailed history of Mudie’s circulating library and the Victorian literary world, see Guinevere Griest, *Mudie’s Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel*, David and Charles, Devon, 1970.

¹⁶⁸ Griest, p. 222.

the end of book borrowing. For those who could not afford the subscriptions to such libraries there were, in many areas, the so-called 'free' libraries.

Public or 'free' libraries were set up nation-wide, financed by ratepayers and initially established to serve the needs of the lower rungs of the middle classes and the working classes – a rapidly increasing social group in Late Victorian England.¹⁶⁹ They catered for many of the less educated members of the population, often referred to as the 'quarter-educated', by supplying them with material which was less intellectually demanding – including novels that had been written, with this new audience in mind, in a simpler language and with shorter sentences.¹⁷⁰ Indeed, novels represented their chief form of trade, comprising at least 60 per cent of the books issued during this period.¹⁷¹

Certainly book borrowing continued, but buying books began to grow in popularity. And it was principally this transfer of emphasis from a book-borrowing to book-buying public that helped lead to the relatively new possibility of a novel achieving an enormously popular, even bestselling, status.¹⁷² The ability to read had been building up over the past few centuries (especially since

¹⁶⁹ However, Keating also adds, that it was not simply readers from the lower classes who benefited from the public libraries. Borrowers from the 'free' libraries in the expanding suburb and commuter areas consisted predominantly of those from the middle and upper classes. Students benefiting from the increased availability of secondary and higher education also made use of these recently established libraries. Indeed, Keating claims that an increasing proportion of borrowers came from the middle classes as much as from the working classes. (See Keating, *The Haunted Study*, p. 415.) Keating continues, by 1915, 57 per cent of the population of Britain had access to a public library – though this was not evenly distributed through town and country. Figures for the same year show that only 2.5 per cent of rural areas had such access, compared to 79 per cent of the urban population. (Keating, *The Haunted Study*, p. 412.) See also Altick, *English Common Reader*, p. 236.

¹⁷⁰ See Altick, 'Publishing', p. 303. Authors such as H. G. Wells were conscious of the comparative accessibility of their novels and so, were quite deliberate in adopting a simpler, less convoluted prose. In comparison to George Eliot, for example, who wrote long novels and long sentences, Wells kept his books short and made his sentences shorter and more abrupt. He wrote so that the style of his fiction would not be hard for most readers to understand.

¹⁷¹ Keating, *The Haunted Study*, p. 417; and Altick, *The English Common Reader*, p. 231. And this is certainly not an insignificant quantity of fiction considering that it is estimated that in the last years of the nineteenth century the annual circulation of all the public libraries in the United Kingdom amounted to between thirty and forty million volumes. (Altick, *The English Common Reader*, p. 239.)

¹⁷² See McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*, p. 19.

the invention of printing in the mid-fifteenth century), but the explosion of cheaper and more easily read fiction (along with newspapers) onto the commercial market greatly facilitated the widespread availability of and accessibility to increased amounts of reading material. Major factors contributing to the appearance of larger quantities of cheaper fiction included the already mentioned fall in popularity of the three-decker and rise of the one-volume novel;¹⁷³ the increasing serialisation of fiction in magazines and periodicals and the growing circulation of these publications; and a general growth in the publication and printing of books.¹⁷⁴

Factors such as the increased and diverse literary output; the employment of literary agents to represent writers; the attention given to subsidiary rights to fiction, including foreign rights (and eventually film rights); and the increasing reliance on advertising in order to ‘provoke’ sales from the general public all contributed to the increasingly complex nature of the turn-of-the-century publishing world.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, it was the ever-evolving and multi-faceted character of this literary scene that succeeded in helping to forge a new partnership

¹⁷³ Publication of the ‘three-decker’ fell from 184 titles in 1894 to only four in 1897. Before this, people rarely bought 31s/6d three-deckers, preferring instead to borrow from the circulating libraries. (Keating, *The Haunted Study*, p. 26.) See also Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 57. As for the production of less expensive fiction – technological improvement through the nineteenth century saw the mass production of cheaper paper. Using chemically-treated wood pulp for paper production and more efficient printing presses helped reduce the cost of producing books. (Altick, ‘Publishing’, p. 303.)

¹⁷⁴ Hoppen claims that between 1800 and 1825 about 580 books appeared every year; by the mid-century this figure had increased to over 2,600; by 1900 it had risen to 6,044. (Hoppen, p. 381.) See also Keating, *The Haunted Study*, p. 33. Of course, not everybody could afford to buy books, despite their fall in price. For estimations of who could afford to do so, see Walter Besant’s analysis in Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study*, p. 405.

¹⁷⁵ For a discussion of literary agents, see Kemp, Mitchell and Trotter, entry on ‘Literary Agents’. For details on the increasingly complex nature of the publishing world, see, for example, Kemp, Mitchell and Trotter, entry on ‘Publishers’. For discussions of widespread advertising as a relatively new sales technique, see Altick, ‘Publishing’, p. 290; and Keating, *The Haunted Study*, p. 82. McAleer adds that many new publishers fed into an expanding book market in a similar way to that of any business feeding into the selling of any other mass commodity – with splashy advertising and lots of publicity. (McAleer, p. 43.) As for information concerning the increasing professionalisation of authorship, see Hoppen, p. 375. Hoppen argues that the fact that more and more authors of the mid-Victorian generation were hailing from professional family backgrounds also helped lead to the idea of the professional author – that this professionalisation was a part of a strategy to ‘throw the cloak of dignity over the cruder imperatives of commerce and cash’.

between culture and commerce – a partnership that was most influential in creating the popular and bestselling novel. As Altick argues, it

made readers of millions of people who would not otherwise have exercised their semi-literacy beyond reading labels on merchandise and posters on walls and buses; for better or worse, it revolutionized literary culture by making Britain into what no country had ever been before, a nation of avid novel readers.¹⁷⁶

That Britain during this period has been labelled ‘a nation of avid novel readers’ firmly recommends the use of novels as a means of accessing the community’s ‘interior life’. And the additional fact that the ‘modern bestseller’ arrived during the same era only serves to further enhance its value to historians of *mentalité*. Therefore, although the focus of this thesis rests strongly on its endorsement of the historical usefulness of the popular novel, it also draws particular attention to the usefulness of the bestseller – a source that has not always received much recognition from historians.

Scholars tend to agree that the word ‘bestseller’ was first coined in or around the 1890s – although Richard Altick argues that the idea of bestsellers, the books that sold more than any other in the same class, had existed much earlier in the history of publishing.¹⁷⁷ As has been mentioned previously, Peter Keating claims that, at the time that this term initially came into usage, it was generally accepted that a

(Hoppen, p. 375.) See also Gedin for a discussion concerning the professionalisation of authorship in Europe.

¹⁷⁶ Altick, ‘Publishing’, p. 303.

¹⁷⁷ Altick, ‘Publishing’, pp. 291-292. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term ‘best-seller’ was first coined in a Kansas newspaper in 1889, though, the man usually credited with systemising the concept of the bestseller list was Harry Thurston Peck. He was editor of the New York *Bookman* which was first published in 1895 and which, from the beginning, carried a list of ‘books in demand’. This list was submitted by booksellers in selected American cities. In 1897 these lists were collected in an annual survey called ‘Best Selling Books’ and in 1903, monthly lists began to be included under the title ‘The Six Best Sellers’. However, Keating disputes the origin of the term. He believes that Peck almost certainly obtained it from the London *Bookman* which had been listing ‘books on demand’ and using the term ‘best-selling books’ for four years before the New York version of the periodical was even founded. (Keating, *The Haunted Study*, p. 439.) See also John Sutherland, *Bestsellers. Popular Fiction of the 1970s*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1981, p. 12.

book had to reach a sales figure of approximately 50,000 copies before it could be referred to as a bestseller.¹⁷⁸ Obviously the figure 50,000 has relative significance. It perhaps does not sound as impressive as the many more recent bestsellers whose sales are located in the millions, but at the turn of the twentieth century books that sold 50,000 copies or more were undoubtedly bestsellers. A small number of popular authors during this time also managed to sell much more than this baseline figure. Marie Corelli and Elinor Glyn are two such examples – each selling hundreds of thousands of copies of their novels.

In order to be so commercially successful, bestselling novels had to (and of course still have to) satisfy the broader needs and desires of a large bulk of the wider reading public. As Robert Druce argues, in his study of the bestselling fiction of Enid Blyton and Ian Fleming, for a book to reach the Bestseller list, enough people have to want to hear and indeed to pay to hear what the author has to say:

To sell in very great numbers, sooner or later the book must ‘strike a nerve’. If fiction, it must tell a story alluring enough for a great many readers to wish to participate in it in fantasy. It must in some way conform to or – more persuasively – give shape to a current ideology, or group of ideologies.¹⁷⁹

It follows that the conventions and attitudes contained within a bestselling novel are made acceptable only by the predispositions or attitudes of that contemporary public. It can be argued that these books were not of the highest literary merit, but it is incontrovertible that they sold because they provided readers with what they wanted. They both ‘express’ and ‘feed’ certain needs in the reading public.¹⁸⁰ As Claud Cockburn argues, it cannot be denied,

that if book X was what a huge majority of book-buyers and book-borrowers wanted to buy or borrow in a given year, or over a period of years, then book X satisfied a need, and expressed and realized emotions and attitudes to life which the

¹⁷⁸ Keating, *The Haunted Study*, p. 424.

¹⁷⁹ Druce, p. 290.

¹⁸⁰ Sutherland, *Bestsellers*, p. 34.

buyers and borrowers did not find expressed or realized elsewhere.¹⁸¹

It is exactly this given opportunity to access this ‘shared sense of fundamental assumptions and values’ that renders these bestselling novels so valuable to historians of *mentalité*.¹⁸²

This is not to infer that discussing the collective mindset of a vast reading public is in any way easy or uncomplicated. The relationship between the writer and the readers of a bestselling novel is somewhat indirect. For instance, as Cockburn argues in regard to bestselling romances, these novels shed light obliquely, rather than directly, on personal behaviour, and even on personal thoughts and feelings, at the time they were written. The romancer does not claim to be ‘dealing with the manners and customs of his contemporaries’. He or she ‘reports events in an imaginary world.’¹⁸³ However, it is surely significant to a study of cultural history that it was the author and his or her contemporary readers who

constructed that world and peopled it with figures of their own devising. The way they ensure or demand that these puppets should behave is inevitably an indication of their attitudes to human behaviour in the ‘private sector’ in their own day.¹⁸⁴

This reference to ‘their own day’ is important to historians. That the popularity of so many of these bestselling novels is so short-lived emphasises the idea that they are firmly entrenched in their own time and place, and that they can therefore be used to access general attitudes specifically of that time and place. Similarly, John Sutherland argues:

what is useful about such culturally embedded works is
what they tell us about the book trade, the market place,

¹⁸¹ Claud Cockburn, *Bestseller. The Books that Everyone Read 1900-1939*, Sidgwick and Jackson, London, 1972, pp. 2-3.

¹⁸² Keating, p. 441.

¹⁸³ Cockburn, pp. 14-15.

¹⁸⁴ Cockburn, p. 15.

the reading public and society generally at the time they have done well.¹⁸⁵

Additionally, the fact that some of these phenomenally popular novels achieve some sort of lasting reputation only renders their insights into a broader popular *mentalité* more valuable. For, as the introduction to the recently published Oxford Popular Fiction Series argues:

Amongst the many works of fiction that have become bestsellers and have then sunk into oblivion a significant number live on in popular consciousness, achieving almost folkloric status. Such books possess, as George Orwell observed, 'native grace' and have often articulated the collective aspirations and anxieties of their time more directly than so-called serious literature.¹⁸⁶

Popular novels, as well as, among other sources, personal letters, diaries, public speeches and journals, offer researchers, historians and sociologists included, a way of accessing 'the mood, the attitude, the state of mind of a nation or a class at this or that period of time'.¹⁸⁷ And the Bestseller list of any era is one of the most reliable of these historical sources. For, as Claud Cockburn points out, there is no way of 'fudging' it.¹⁸⁸

Of course, advocating the historical importance of bestselling fiction is not to claim that all of the reading public at the turn of the twentieth century had uniform thoughts, emotions and opinions. But the Bestseller lists of this time do shed light on thoughts and feelings that were common to large sections of the general contemporary audience.¹⁸⁹ The numerical strength of this audience supports

¹⁸⁵ Sutherland, *Bestsellers*, p. 5.

¹⁸⁶ From the introduction to Erskine Childers, *The Riddle of the Sands*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995 [1903]. A similar idea is voiced in Shirley Marchalonis, *College Girls: A Century in Fiction*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1995, p. 2.

¹⁸⁷ Cockburn, p. 3.

¹⁸⁸ Cockburn, p. 3.

¹⁸⁹ Cockburn, p. 4.

Cockburn's claim that 'bestsellers really are a mirror of 'the mind and face' of an age'.¹⁹⁰

In order to appeal to such a wide and diverse audience, bestsellers often write to a particular formula. Authors, including Corelli, who repeatedly attain consistently high levels of commercial success doubtless revisit the style and the sentiments that managed to ensure their initial achievement. Yet, the formulae that these writers employ are very much dependent on the time and place in which they were produced and consumed. The concept and particular character of a bestseller, therefore, are in a constant state of flux, in tune with changing societies, changing collective moods, and therefore changing needs seeking satisfaction.

It can generally be said, though, that these fictional formulae often include the powerful inducement of escapism. There is a general consensus, for example, that many people read in order to escape the more mundane or familiar aspects of their daily existence. Indeed, Druce, referring to the longstanding argument that 'low' forms of fiction risk influencing readers in a negative manner, remarks that it was, and still is, not uncommon for this literature to be viewed as a 'spiritual drug' – with varying degrees of danger attached to its intake.¹⁹¹ His understanding is that people read these novels in order to compensate for the inadequacies of their own experiences.¹⁹² And commercially successful authors tend to attain this remarkable level of popularity because of their ability to convince the general audience of the value of the particular daydreams that they offer. Druce identifies the main ingredients for commercial success in the literary market as professionalism, self-confidence, enhanced by the belief that the dreams they create are both '*true* and valuable', a flair for self-advertisement and good luck.¹⁹³ His work refers specifically to the 1950s, but as has been seen with Bennett and

¹⁹⁰ Cockburn, p. 6. Again, for a more substantial inquiry into the issue of how far fiction influences the reader, a topic not dealt with here, see Druce, pp. 287-302.

¹⁹¹ Druce, p. 290.

¹⁹² In support he refers to Freud's belief that people only day-dreamed if they were dissatisfied in any way. (Druce, p. 292.)

¹⁹³ Druce, pp. 287-288.

Corelli, the literary market during the Late Victorian and the Edwardian era tended to require similar elements.

Druce's remark about bestselling fiction being looked on as a form of narcotic draws particular attention to the stigma that is often attached to lowbrow literature. There is undoubtedly a degree of intellectual snobbery associated with the reading of what is typically bestselling fiction. Cockburn claims that this is due to the supposed 'light' or entertaining tone of this particular level of fiction. Many, as a defensive measure, deny reading bestsellers that the 'culture-meters' have not registered, or registered highly enough.¹⁹⁴ Perhaps this hesitation is also due in part to the perception that bestselling fiction 'writes down' to the reader, thereby implying that reading such texts does not require much intellectual activity. However, the fact that a work of fiction is entertaining, or even less intellectually demanding, does not disqualify it from being an extremely useful source to historians. The fact that it is enjoyable does not mean that it does not possess 'serious social significance'.¹⁹⁵ Historians usually employ a range of documents in order to attempt to access the past; they are generally reluctant to depend on a sole kind of source, but seek corroborative evidence, knowing each may have deficiencies. But as Cockburn again points out:

Historians do their best to correct ... [this] faulty vision by study of contemporary documents. Among these, particularly in a period when print was still the chief means of mass communication, bestsellers probably rate higher in terms of the light they shed on what people thought and why, than official archives and even the diaries of individuals.¹⁹⁶

Popular fiction, bestselling novels included, provides an invaluable insight into what Cockburn terms the 'private sector' of life.



¹⁹⁴ Cockburn, p. 4.

¹⁹⁵ Cockburn, p. 6.

¹⁹⁶ Cockburn, p. 83.

This thesis argues that whether novels achieve a significant degree of popularity, like Bennett's, or reach the heady heights of a bestseller, like Corelli's, they undoubtedly satisfy the needs and tastes of a considerable proportion of the general reading public. Yet, there is also no doubting that the type of historical insights garnered from middlebrow or less widely read novels differs from those revealed by bestselling books. Therefore, the question remains of the comparative value of each form of fiction to historians. This particular examination of Bennett's and Corelli's writing asks – which of these two categories, middlebrow or bestseller, is more historically useful? Which is of more value to historians of *mentalité*?

In very brief reply, both are extremely useful. Both satisfy the historian's quest for increased understanding, but in different ways. Bestsellers address important issues on a more general level than middlebrow works. They reveal much about the audience as a whole. They inform the historian about the collective aspirations, fears and moods of a large proportion of people in a society. Middlebrow works, on the other hand, penetrate more deeply into the individual lives of a novel's characters and further into the workings of the society depicted. They represent a more personal, more substantial exploration of the private emotions of individuals – material that is an important basis for the history of emotions.

Each novel, whether bestselling or less popular fiction, acts as a window on the world in which it is written – though the positioning of this view may vary. Bestselling authors often present a widely accepted general image of their world. They not only reveal their vast audience's collective hopes, they also help historians to gain an awareness of the broad factors forcing many of their readers to seek this form of escapism. The authors of middlebrow fiction, on the other hand, voice views more individual and personal than those of more commercially

successful works. They often give more of an insight into how it actually felt for an individual, or group of individuals, to live at the time of writing.

The different nature of middlebrow and bestselling fiction and their subsequently different contributions to a history of women's emotions recommends, even necessitates the adoption of different approaches towards garnering their respective insights – an issue that is discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 2

Using Fiction as a Historical Source

Evidence garnered from fiction has been used by researchers from diverse scholarly backgrounds. Indeed, this is a field of study where a large range of disciplines meet – disciplines that include literary studies, philosophy and sociology, as well various realms of historical investigation, such as the history of ideas and the history of emotions. The value of novels in this last area of historical study – that of emotions – is of primary concern here. During the Late Victorian and Edwardian years, when realist conventions often demanded that credibility be sustained among a wide readership, novelists tended to pay considerable attention to presenting emotional realism. This certainly recommends the use of novels from this era to historians aiming to reconstruct past emotions.

In spite of this usefulness, however, the employment of fiction has often been limited. The historian, Gertrude Himmelfarb agrees, arguing, for example, that where fiction has been utilised, it has frequently been limited to an illustrative function – often being used to illustrate the ‘spirit of the times’, perhaps in ‘a final chapter of miscellanea containing all those odds and ends of intellectual, cultural, and social history which could not be accommodated in the text proper’.¹⁹⁷ Yet, as Himmelfarb also points out, in a historical study analysing ideas and values, fiction should be given ‘greater prominence and centrality’.¹⁹⁸ Hesitation to depend on a more substantial use of fictional evidence is often associated with uncertainty about the exact nature of the evidence offered and the uses to which this can be put – points that this chapter addresses.

¹⁹⁷ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty. England in the Early Industrial Age*, Faber and Faber, London and Boston, 1984, p. 403. Oliver MacDonagh argues a similar point. Novels, he explains, have often been used simply to ‘render...more vivid and concrete what the historian already knows.’ (Oliver MacDonagh, *Jane Austen. Real and Imagined Worlds*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1991, p. 164.) Himmelfarb argues further that fiction is a ‘much abused’ historical source, with this abuse ranging from affording novels too much prominence in history writing to historians looking for the wrong information from texts; she declares that ‘some caveats are in order’. (Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, p. 403.)

¹⁹⁸ Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, p. 403.

The aim of this chapter, then, is firstly to examine the nature of novels, especially popular novels, thereby establishing to which areas of historical investigation they most appropriately lend themselves. And, secondly, to explain the approach that this thesis adopts in garnering historical understanding from fictional texts.

However, before discussing more fully the merits of fiction as a historical source, it is appropriate to mention a number of cultural and literary historians and other writers who do value and use fiction as a central historical source. I have relied in particular on Gertrude Himmelfarb, Shirley Robin Letwin, Alison Light, Nicola Beauman and Linda Rosenzweig.¹⁹⁹ These writers come from a range of scholarly backgrounds and schools of thought and, because of this, use fiction for various purposes and in various ways.

Himmelfarb employs fiction in her history of the idea of poverty. However, her work differs from this thesis in that, whereas she concentrates on presenting a history of ideas, this study concerns itself largely with the history of emotions. Shirley Robin Letwin, on the other hand, although her study too concerns a history of ideas, tends to have more of a philosophical rather than a historical focus. Letwin investigates the idea of a gentleman in the novels of the popular mid-Victorian novelist, Anthony Trollope. Her book concerns itself with ‘explicating the morality that defines the gentleman’ in Trollope’s texts, rather than with examining how gentlemen conducted themselves in mid-Victorian society.²⁰⁰ In this way, Letwin’s study differs from the primary concerns of this thesis which link the sentiments contained within Bennett’s and Corelli’s novels much more closely with the society in which they were produced. Still, Letwin’s aims are not wholly dissimilar to those pursued here. In her book, she studies how people

¹⁹⁹ See Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*; Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Gentleman in Trollope: Individuality and Moral Conduct*, Macmillan, London, Basingstoke, 1984; Alison Light, *Forever England. Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*, Routledge, London, 1991; Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession. The Women’s Novel 1914-1939*, Virago, London, 1983; and Linda W. Rosenzweig, *The Anchor of My Life. The Middle-Class American Mothers and Daughters, 1880-1920*, New York University Press, New York and London, 1993.

²⁰⁰ Letwin, p. x.

within her chosen novels both understood and conducted themselves – thereby concentrating on individual feelings. As Letwin herself says, ‘the novelist’s art provides the kind of information about people’s conduct that can be had only by knowing someone intimately for a long time and that is rarely available to historians or made available by them.’²⁰¹

Linda Rosenzweig, Alison Light and Nicola Beauman would no doubt agree with the sentiments expressed by Letwin. All three write about women’s inner lives in the past and they use novels to do so. Linda Rosenzweig devotes at least one chapter to the analysis of a number of popular novels written between 1880 and 1920 to throw historical light on middle-class mother-daughter relationships in America. Among the other sources she uses to build up a picture of changing concepts of these familial relationships are private correspondence, diaries and journals. Rosenzweig considers all of these sources, popular novels included, to be particularly valuable for helping to fill in the existing ‘gaps’ in histories of women’s lives – more especially, in the emotional dimensions of these lives. This is not to claim that Rosenzweig places complete trust in the information offered by commercially successful fiction. On the contrary, she voices reservations about the representative nature of the details contained within these sources. However, for the purpose of her study, that of accessing the more private history of women, there are few, if any, more insightful sources available than those she analyses, novels included.

Alison Light, a literary scholar, employs novels for a similar purpose, that of studying interior history – what she terms ‘that other history, a history from inside.’²⁰² In using a cross-section of novels to study femininity and conservatism between the wars, Light analyses texts ranging from the works of a ‘high-brow’s delight’, Ivy Compton-Burnett, to those of a much more popular author, Agatha Christie, whose novels, she remarks, were situated ‘at the top of the league-table of

²⁰¹ Letwin, p. x.

²⁰² Light, p. 5.

the world's bestsellers'.²⁰³ Like Rosenzweig, Light considers fiction, particularly novels, to be a valuable means of penetrating middle-class women's inner lives, their thoughts and feelings – and a valuable way of accessing English cultural life in the early decades of the twentieth century.

And, finally, Nicola Beauman is another who certainly agrees with the use of fiction to provide insights into women's lives – lives that were not otherwise well documented. Her study of 'the woman's novel', also set during the inter-war years, was inspired by a curiosity about lives considered 'respectable, ordinary and everyday'.²⁰⁴ For the most part, she uses novels written for middle-class women by middle-class women to create an image of the more or less 'unremarkable' lives of English women from this social echelon. The novel presented itself as an ideal literary source to employ in such a pursuit because during this era these women tended to have enough leisure time at their disposal to read as well as the opportunity to access such reading material. Furthermore, Beauman concentrates largely on popular works of fiction – works she considers to be particularly interesting as well as valuable for her purpose. As she explains, it 'seemed so strange that an enormous body of fiction should influence and delight a whole generation and then be ignored or dismissed'.²⁰⁵

In all of these instances, fiction is considered a highly valuable source when attempting to access either past ideas or emotions. Why is this so? Why is fiction, novels especially, so suited to these areas of investigation? One answer lies with the novel's inescapable connection with the society in which it was both produced and read. And another rests with the nature and content of novels, especially popular novels during the Late Victorian and Edwardian years.

Novels can provide the historian with access to a community's collective emotions and experiences – especially when the society the historian is studying is that

²⁰³ Light, p. 5.

²⁰⁴ Beauman, p. 1.

which the authors and their initial or contemporary audience shared. This is principally because novelists, novels and readers are all grounded in their society. Novelists, like all other people, cannot help but be shaped, whatever the degree, by their social and moral environment.²⁰⁶ Like readers, they cannot ‘transcend’ their own ‘moral universe’.²⁰⁷ Therefore, the sentiments that they express in their texts – views and attitudes that are packaged in such a way as to appeal to and accommodate the audience’s shared values – are necessarily rooted in their own time.²⁰⁸ And this promotes the value of their writing for historians of *mentalité*. For, as the sociologist, Joan Rockwell, argues:

To say that writers necessarily reflect their own time, which I must repeat is the justification for using their fictions to study the facts of their society, is to say that they are bound to do so, and cannot choose to do otherwise.²⁰⁹

In spite of its imaginative content,²¹⁰ then, the novel is ‘a product of society’, not simply ‘the crystallised result of private fantasy’.²¹¹

The novel’s historical worth is reinforced by the fact that it is considered above all literary genres to have ‘a specific allegiance to reality’ – it is the literary form that ‘we interpret as closest to life itself.’²¹² Moreover, this close allegiance with

²⁰⁵ Beauman, p. 4.

²⁰⁶ In Oscar Wilde’s words, for example, the artist, and in this case the novelist, is not ‘an isolated fact’, instead he or she is ‘the resultant of a certain *milieu* and a certain entourage.’ (Oscar Wilde in Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1960, p. 170.)

²⁰⁷ Joan Rockwell, *Fact in Fiction. The Uses of Literature in the Systematic Study of Society*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1974, p. 120.

²⁰⁸ Rockwell makes similar observations. See Rockwell, p. 42.

²⁰⁹ Rockwell, p. 119.

²¹⁰ Peter Laslett, for example, voices concern about the presence of imagination in fiction when this source is used for historical purposes. For more detail see Peter Laslett, ‘The Wrong Way Through the Telescope: A Note on Literary Evidence in Sociology and in Historical Sociology’, *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1976, pp. 319-342, p. 324.

²¹¹ Rockwell, p. 3.

²¹² Andrew Michael Roberts, ‘Introduction: The Novel as a Genre’, in Andrew Michael Roberts (ed.), *Bloomsbury Guides to English Literature: The Novel From Its Origins to the Present Day*, Bloomsbury, London, 1993, pp. 1-4, p. 3. Gail Cunningham, in her essay on the nineteenth century novel, that which is of particular interest to this thesis, claims that the novel: ‘addresses itself directly to ‘life’, without the intervening artistic medium of verse or dramatic form, in a way which other literary genres do not’. (Gail Cunningham, ‘Society, History and the Reader: The

‘reality’ is further endorsed by the fact that if a novel was to be popular in an age when the realist tradition was very much alive – most notably the Victorian period and, to a considerable extent, the Edwardian era – it had to sustain social and emotional credibility among a wide range of readers. As Rockwell again points out:

The expertise of the public in matters of factual knowledge about the society in which they and the novel live, and in expectations of how fictional people may be expected to behave, is certainly one of the greatest checks on the exuberance of writers.²¹³

It follows then that an author’s freedom of representation is curbed by writing for an audience who have particular expectations in mind – and an audience who have emotional wants and desires that need to be addressed if commercial success is to be achieved.²¹⁴ Such popularity surely supports the representativeness of the sentiments expressed – sentiments historians of *mentalité* can access.

That novelists typically explore human interiority further recommends the usefulness of their insights to historians investigating interior lives. It was this skill of penetrating her characters’ minds, for example, that inspired Lord Acton, himself a historian, to revere the nineteenth-century novelist, Jane Austen. Acton considered Austen capable:

not only of reading the diverse hearts of men, but creeping into their skin, watching the world through their eyes,

Nineteenth-Century Novel’, in Andrew Michael Roberts (ed.), *Bloomsbury Guides to English Literature: The Novel From its Origins to the Present Day*, Bloomsbury, London, 1993, pp. 31-44, p. 31.) Rockwell presents a similar view when she quotes Edmund Gosse who, in 1911, claimed that a novel was a ‘sustained story which is not historically true but might very easily be so.’ (Rockwell, p. 88.)

²¹³ Rockwell, p. 89.

²¹⁴ John Tosh, in reference to novels of rather high literary quality, argues that the ‘success of an author is often attributable to the way in which he or she articulates the values and preoccupations of literary contemporaries.’ (John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History. Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, Longman, London and New York, 1991, p. 38.) But surely when referring to more popularly accepted novels, even bestsellers, fictional works of perhaps lower literary merit but more reflective of popular sentiment, the ‘literary contemporaries’ here could be replaced with ‘readers’.

feeling their latent background of conviction, discerning theory and habit, influences of thought and knowledge, of life and of descent; and having obtained this experience, of recovering her independence, stripping off the borrowed shell, and exposing scientifically and indifferently the soul.²¹⁵

It is not only the depth, but also the diversity of this emotional insight that is difficult to find expressed in other documents. Novels, as Lionel Trilling points out, offer insights of quite a unique kind – insights much more telling about the innerness of life than simply who married whom, who aspires to what, and who ought to love whom.²¹⁶ These literary works, he argues, tell us ‘about the look and feel of things, how things are done and what things are worth and what they cost and what the odds are’.²¹⁷ And of course, Trilling is here concerned with *human* cost – cost in feelings and emotions. Because of their ‘highly receptive and flexible’ nature as a literary form, ‘there seems to be no aspect of experience which [novels] cannot embrace’.²¹⁸

Of course, individual authors’ skills determine the extent of their penetration of the human mind and therefore qualify the value of their observations. However, even those novelists with less literary skill, but achieving very high sales figures, offer valuable insights into the more superficial thoughts – dreams, hopes, aspirations, even fears and anxieties – of their readership. Their continuing high levels of popularity confirm that they provide their large audience with emotional fulfilment, no matter how deep or shallow these emotions are. So, for any historian with Acton’s ‘eagerness to expose the face behind the mask, the person

²¹⁵ In John Pemble, *Venice Rediscovered*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995, p. 84.

²¹⁶ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination. Essays on Literature and Society*, Mercury Books, London, 1961, p. 211.

²¹⁷ Trilling, p. 211.

²¹⁸ Roberts, p. 31. In relation to the period of this particular study, Cunningham notes that: ‘Fiction in the nineteenth century could and did address every topic, enter every dispute, reflect every ideal of an age perceived by those who lived through it to be one of unprecedentedly rapid change.’ (Cunningham, ‘Society, History and the Reader’, p. 31.)

behind the performance’,²¹⁹ for anyone wishing to study the more private history of human experience, novels, of any literary calibre, offer a rich vein of understanding.

Moreover, novels not only reflect the complexities of lived experience, but they also mirror its dynamism.²²⁰ The cultural historian, Raymond Williams, agrees – arguing:

To understand works of literature meant necessarily, I thought, understanding the times and societies they had been written in: not as ‘background’, an inert two-dimensional staged society; but as active experience, of the kind I know in my own life in a particular society at a particular time.²²¹

Not only do novelists explore the depths of human emotions and experiences, but they do so in relation to the prominent issues of the society at the time. Their human analysis meshes with the current debates or discussions of the period in which they write, whether they agree with or challenge the ‘norm’.²²² Indeed, it is precisely this interaction between the text and contemporary debates that renders novels so historically valuable in Alison Light’s mind:

Because novels not only speak from their cultural moment but take issue with it, imagining new versions of its problems, exposing, albeit by accident as well as by design, its confusions, conflicts and irrepressible desires,

²¹⁹ Pemble, p. 84.

²²⁰ Writing about the liberal imagination and taking into account the complexities of life that are often reflected in literature, Trilling claims that as a historical source it has a ‘unique relevance’ because it ‘is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty’. (Trilling, p. xv.) Trilling is a literary and cultural critic, but as he certainly has a keen awareness of historical context, his insights are valuable for the purposes of this thesis.

²²¹ Raymond Williams, ‘An Introduction to Reading Culture and Society’, in Fred Inglis (ed.), *Literature and Environment. Essays in Reading and Social Studies*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1971, pp. 125-140, p. 126.

²²² Both Christopher Hill and Rockwell write that contesting issues find expression in the fiction of the time. (Christopher Hill, *A Nation of Change and Novelty. Radical Politics, Religion and*

the study of fiction is an especially inviting and demanding way into the past.²²³

And certainly, the commercial success of popular authors of fiction tends to rest on the fact that they appeal to – or at least relate closely to – the prevailing interests of their readers.

The principal historical worth of novels, especially popular novels, therefore, lies in their depiction of human interiority and in the pathway they provide into past mindsets – into the values and the attitudes of their readership. Few historians, if any, claim that these sources offer an exact mirror of an era's social and material reality. K. D. M. Snell's discussion of Thomas Hardy's novels in relation to the labouring poor certainly emphasises this point. Snell's study stresses that Hardy's fiction more closely reflects the views of his mainly middle-class audience than the social and material reality of life in Dorset at the end of the nineteenth century.²²⁴ The fact that Hardy often writes about the lives of the peasantry in his works of fiction does not necessarily guarantee that it is their views that he is depicting. Indeed, as Snell maintains, Hardy's personal background does not at all qualify him to speak with authority on Dorset peasantry.²²⁵ However, what Snell does argue concerning the value of Hardy's novels to historians is that:

in his choice of signification, in his artistic emphasis on problems of personal alienation and marital estrangement, he was firmly embedded in and responsive to the social history of the period.²²⁶

Literature in Seventeenth-Century England, Routledge, London and New York, 1990, p. 213; and Rockwell, p. 4)

²²³ Light, p. 2.

²²⁴ K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor. Social Change and Agrarian England 1660-1900*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 391-392. He does not, however, continue with any further discussion of Hardy's middle-class readers – they are not the subject of his book.

²²⁵ Snell, p. 387. Himmelfarb makes similar comments about attitudes towards 'the condition of the poor' as depicted in novels – in the novels of Charles Dickens, for example. See Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*.

²²⁶ Snell, p. 410. This passage, and particularly the use of the term 'signification', resonates with Karlheinz Stierle's theories – referred to later in this chapter, see p. 83.

In this way, then, he affirms that these novels, as with so many others, are primarily useful for the understanding that they offer of emotions and inner experiences during a particular period in history.

This emphasis on the audience is of undoubted importance to historians of *mentalité*. After all it is the interplay between these two that these scholars are eager to tap into.²²⁷ Of course, it is the individual writer who shapes the entire work being analysed for historical insight. But, while validating the writer as an observer and a voice of his or her society is a very necessary step (as has been done for Bennett and Corelli in the previous chapter), it is certainly not the only nor the most important act to be undertaken by historians making use of fictional insights.²²⁸ Briefly establishing the nature of the relationship existing between the text and the readership surely is also of necessary concern.

There is certainly a complex relationship between the author, the text and the reader. It is not simply the writer who imposes his or her individuality on this written 'story' (whatever the form this 'story' takes – whether, for example, a piece of fiction or a piece of historical writing). The reader also plays a highly significant role. Readers bring themselves to the text – including their own preoccupations, biases and values. These factors no doubt colour their interpretation of the text to varying degrees. There is, therefore, an interpretive process between the text as it is written and the text as the reader understands it. Individual readers may realise the text in different ways, but the differences of interpretation between members of a reading public inhabiting the same society, with the high likelihood of sharing similar values, are liable to be subtle rather

²²⁷ Here I refer to the unstated but implied assumptions that often pass between the writer of fiction and the readers consuming this fiction. These assumptions will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter, see p. 85, especially in reference to what Trilling terms the 'hum and buzz of implication'.

²²⁸ Numerous scholars believe, however, that establishing the author's background or their artistic or even personal intent is extremely important. For example, see the significance attached to knowing the author's background in Laslett; Snell; and William O. Aydelotte, 'England of Marx and Mill as Reflected in Fiction', *The Journal of Economic History*, Supplement VIII, 1948, pp. 42-58.

than overt or blatant. Understanding the potential relationship between the text and the audience, therefore, necessitates some comment on an area of literary theory referred to as 'reader-response criticism'.

Reader-response criticism is a school of thought within literary theory that considers the effects of a text on the reader – that considers the reader's appreciation of the literary work. Leading exponents of reader-response or reception-based theories of literary criticism include, among others, Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss, who are the best-known advocates of a 'distinctively' German school of modern criticism referred to as 'reception-theory' (*Rezeptions-aesthetik*); Georges Poulet from what David Lodge refers to as the 'so-called Geneva school of phenomenological criticism'; and Stanley Fish, a leading American reader-response critic.²²⁹ This is not to say that all proponents of reception theory think alike. There are many differences of opinion. Fish, for instance, believes that meaning exists independent of the text – authorial intention and literary content do not produce the reader's interpretation. Meaning is formed by the readers – by the assumptions they bring to the text and by their system or process of reading.²³⁰ Similarly, Wolfgang Iser considers that the text exists only when it is realised by the reader. Iser's views, however, are less radical than those of Fish in that he does consider that meaning is essentially contained within the literary work – that it is not solely at the discretion of the individual reader.²³¹ Lodge considers Iser's theories to be less 'mystical', more 'scientific', than those of the theorists belonging to the Geneva school of phenomenological criticism, such as Georges Poulet. Whereas Poulet's understanding of reader-response

²²⁹ See, for example, David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, Longman, London and New York, 1991, pp. 211 and 310; and James Smith Allen, 'History and the Novel: Mentalité in Modern Popular Fiction', *History and Theory*, vol. 22, 1983, pp. 233-252, p. 247. See also Robert Druce, *This Day Our Daily Fictions. An Enquiry into the Multi-Million Bestseller Status of Enid Blyton and Ian Fleming*, Rodopi, Amsterdam-Atlanta, 1992, pp. 293-302 for discussion of the ideas of another theorist involved with reception theory, Karlheinz Stierle.

²³⁰ See Stanley Fish, 'Interpreting the *Variorum*', in David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, Longman, London and New York, 1991, pp. 311-329.

²³¹ Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', in David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, Longman, London and New York, 1991, pp. 212-228, p. 216.

involves the author and reader accessing and infiltrating each other's consciousness, or interior worlds, Iser's ideas are situated more along the lines that the text and the reader converge to create meaning.²³²

Put very simply, Iser considers that the meaning of a literary text is constructed by the author providing the framework and the reader building up meaning according to the given guidelines. The reading process is dynamic because the reader's imagination is called on to play an active role. The reader (in accordance with the limits imposed by the author) fills in the 'indeterminacy' of the text – the 'gaps' or 'unwritten assumptions' of the literary work.²³³ The degree of freedom granted to the reader to exercise his or her imagination in interpreting the text is prescribed by the writer – by how much space he or she gives the reader to employ their imaginative faculties.²³⁴ But importantly, Iser, unlike Fish, understands the construction of meaning as a process that involves equally the minds of the reader and the writer.

This understanding is similar to that of Karlheinz Stierle (the theorist that Robert Druce builds on in his study of the bestselling novels of Enid Blyton and Ian Fleming) – an understanding with which this thesis concurs.²³⁵ Stierle's concept of 'quasi-pragmatic reception' involves interplay between the text and the reader's values and, indeed, prejudices. That is to say, readers bring themselves to the text which is then realised – their own stereotypes (and this is in relation more

²³² Lodge, p. 211.

²³³ Iser, p. 213.

²³⁴ Iser provides a simile to further illustrate his understanding of this construction of literary meaning. Constructing the meaning of a text is similar to star-gazing. Two individuals can look at the same stars and see two different images or formations. Neither interpretation is wrong. In the same way, Iser explains, 'the 'stars' in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable'. The stars represent the limitations imposed by the author, the lines the reader's imagination at work. (Iser, p. 216 and p. 218.)

²³⁵ See Druce, chapter 18, 'The Omniscient Author'. Stierle's theories are also discussed later in this chapter, see p. 83.

specifically and typically to bestselling fiction) being activated and confirmed, or given credence, by the texts they read.²³⁶

A number of writers have applied their understanding of these literary theories to their studies of the worldviews or mindsets of the reading public. James Smith Allen, in his article, 'History and the Novel: *Mentalité* in Modern Popular Fiction', argues that popular fiction is invaluable for those wishing to capture something of the private and interior world of a contemporary society – for the author of the text in question 'shares in the mental world of ordinary people who read' it – those who constitute his or her readership.²³⁷ He goes further to support the usefulness of fiction to historians by referring to Georges Poulet's understanding of the shared relationship between popular novel and reader:

the text serves as a mediator between two interiors, the reader's and the author's, that would otherwise be inaccessible to each other. Thus, the act of reading a novel permits an author to enter the consciousness of his audience (and vice versa). The extent to which this fundamental communication occurs in the reading of popular literature suggests its remarkable usefulness in capturing the mental world of its readers.²³⁸

Claud Cockburn, author of *Bestseller. The Books that Everyone Read 1900-1939*, maintains it is exactly this interplay between the author's and audience's values and attitudes that is integral to the understanding, and therefore success, of a bestselling work of fiction. Cockburn recognises the relationship between author and audience as:

first, the existence of certain attitudes, prejudices, aspirations, etc., in the reader's conscious or subconscious

²³⁶ Druce, pp. 293-297. To support his argument, Druce also calls on the ideas of D. W. Harding, as expressed in his article 'Psychological Processes in the Reading of Fiction', that define the reading of fiction 'as a process in which author and reader meet to affirm a set of values'. (D. W. Harding, quoted in Druce, p. 297.)

²³⁷ Allen, p. 234.

²³⁸ Allen, p. 247.

mind; secondly, the existence of a *rapprochement*, a ‘sympathy’ – in the exact sense of the word – between the conscious or subconscious mind of the reader and that of the author; thirdly, the craftsmanship of the author, engaged in translating these attitudes, aspirations, etc., into acceptable fictional form; [and] fourthly, reception by the reader of these fictional expressions.²³⁹

The relationship existing between the writer and his or her contemporary audience allows for a society’s ‘manners’ to be understood – even when, or especially when, they are not obvious to readers distanced from the era or society in which the text was produced. It is this interaction, even interdependence, between the minds of the author and of the readers that promotes the usefulness of novels (especially novels boasting a wide readership) to historians desiring to access what Oliver MacDonagh terms, the ‘felt reality’ of the past.²⁴⁰

Doubtless, this convergence between writer and reader results in individual interpretations of the text. But, the degree to which these readings vary relies, in large part, on the nature of the literary text in question and the extent to which readers share the same social and moral environment. For historians examining the uses of popular fiction during the last decades of the nineteenth- and early decades of the twentieth-century, as this thesis does, investigations of both of these areas prove positive.

In the first instance, the nature of much of the popular mode of realist fiction during the Victorian and Edwardian age leaves little room for many complex variations of interpretation. Arnold Bennett’s novels, for example, borrowing much from the techniques of the French Realists of his era, carefully guide the reactions of his readers. Rarely are there direct authorial intrusions on his part (where there are, they are often in the form of ironic observations), but there is still

²³⁹ Claud Cockburn, *Bestseller. The Books that Everyone Read 1900-1939*, Sidgwick and Jackson, London, 1972, p. 11.

little room left for wide ranging interpretations of his narratives. Furthermore, the outcomes of his plots usually support the overall tone of his writing, leaving the reader in little doubt as to how the author, and also often the characters, view the situations at hand. In comparison with Bennett's fictional techniques, Marie Corelli's penchant for overt moral didacticism would have left even less freedom for individual interpretation among her vast group of readers. Within her highly popular novels, Corelli firmly takes her readers by the hand, providing very little room for dissent or divergence of any kind. Indeed, her works of fiction are so heavily laden with blatant repetition and didacticism that it seems very unlikely that anyone who did not already agree with much of what she had to say could read her books – and continue to do so, thus ensuring her bestselling status.

Secondly, there is a relevant – and relative – degree of homogeneity. Many of those reading the popular literature of the turn of the century shared social and moral codes. As the previous chapter has argued, many of the general reading public came from the middle classes, or from those groups closest to these class boundaries – readers who were likely to have shared both similar values and similar prejudices. The continuing popularity of authors such as Marie Corelli throughout the late Victorian and Edwardian period, and Arnold Bennett in the first few decades of the twentieth century indicates that a large bulk of the readers of the period – readers who were influenced by these similar moral values and social conditions – were likely to derive very similar readings of these novels, novels that hailed from a tradition of realism.

It follows, then, that if history is, as L. S. Kramer believes, a 'collection of voices and views',²⁴¹ and if there is no single authoritative or definitive view of the past, then each author of fiction can simply be regarded as one contributing voice of his or her world; a novelist is one of the voices that make up the multitude of merged

²⁴⁰ See MacDonagh, p. ix.

²⁴¹ Lloyd S. Kramer, 'Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination: The Literary Challenge of Hayden White and Dominik La Capra', in Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989, pp. 97-128, p. 118.

voices that is history. Writers' accounts of their own time and place are valuable as products of precisely these – as social commentaries, as eyewitness testimonies, that are relevant to a specific and defined world. Therefore, historians can regard fictional texts as views into the worlds in which they were created. Through such texts, historians can access attitudes implicit within these worlds – the values, prejudices, aspirations and even the fears of the involved reading public.

Novels are extremely valuable to historians of values and ideas, and popular novels, as opposed to the more highbrow or elitist examples of this literary form, represent particularly rich sources for historians studying the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, the modern concept of the bestselling novel only came into being at this time. The novel, as an increasingly marketable commodity, began more and more to serve the needs of a growing contemporary reading public – an increasingly wide and varied group whose attitudes and values it is possible for historians to attempt to access.

Furthermore, the levels of commercial success achieved by these novels can often be traced partly to the way in which they discussed or drew topical issues into their narrative – issues very much of the time and place in which the text was produced. Often such references to topical concerns mean that the novel's relevance is removed from those readers distanced from that society. This is certainly true of, and indeed demonstrated by, many bestselling novels that are mostly forgotten after their often relatively brief period of extreme popularity. Such forms of literature frequently sacrifice any in-depth interplay with the intricacies and complexities of human nature for more general or superficial concerns, even though that interplay accounts for the universal 'truths' found in many more respected pieces of writing.

This line of reasoning fits with the career profiles of both Marie Corelli and Arnold Bennett. Corelli experienced extremely high but relatively short-lived

financial and public success.²⁴² The more middlebrow novels of Bennett, achieving a solid level of commercial success at the time of their production, are certainly less forgotten than those of Corelli.²⁴³ Each, therefore, presents historians with different types of insights – a situation that necessitates the application of slightly different methods of approach to each type of fiction.



It is now appropriate to address the question of how novels can best be approached in order to provide insight into the past. There is no established method available here, only a somewhat imprecise approach, one resting on the historian's practised skills. Such an absence of a prescribed and exact method of analysis is not unfamiliar in the writing of history. Many, if not all, sources that are regularly employed by social historians have to undergo critical analysis – a critical approach that, although guided by historical principles, is often shaped by the individual historians themselves.

In order, therefore, to use novels as effectively as possible, historians need to familiarise themselves with the nature of the type of fiction they are dealing with, and therefore the nature of what can be garnered. They need to approach the fictional text knowing, broadly, what kind of insights they are in search of. This seems almost too obvious a point to argue when any historian analysing any historical source uses a very general approach such as this. Therefore, to elaborate on this, Oliver MacDonagh proposes that historians approach novels with a model of the novelist-historian relationship in mind. Again, this could apply to any form of historical evidence; however, his suggestion is that the writer be treated 'as witness to the present and – if it is not impertinent to add – the historian as presiding magistrate'.²⁴⁴

²⁴² Apart from the before mentioned publication of her most popular novel, *The Sorrows of Satan*, in 1985, it is very difficult to find any more recent re-issuing of Corelli's novels.

²⁴³ Unlike Corelli's, Bennett's novels have been republished by a number of publishing firms in the last few decades – including Penguin, Wordsworth, and Alan Sutton.

²⁴⁴ MacDonagh, p. 164.

It has to be established initially that the novelists in question are qualified observers and commentators on the era and society to be analysed – which the first chapter of this thesis aimed to demonstrate regarding Bennett and Corelli. Very simply this requires placing the writers in their society, and more specifically placing them in a position where they could, and did, view the people and issues on which they centre their fiction.²⁴⁵ Secondly, the novelist's relationship with the reading public ought to be established. The sales figures and the author's public reputation are relevant here – as is the general make-up of this audience – for example, their class and gender – if this is at all possible to determine. It is, after all, the audience's values and attitudes that many historians of *mentalité* are analysing.

The next step involves the actual evidence in question. Using fiction is not entirely unlike using other forms of historical evidence, including diaries and letters. Christopher Hill provides similar, if understandably general, guidelines – historians should expose fiction to the 'same *sort* [Hill's emphasis] of criticisms as archival documents'.²⁴⁶ However, as has been argued, this absence of an exact system of approach to fictional evidence sometimes causes anxiety. Many of these envisaged difficulties of approach are related to concern over what is sometimes argued to be the subjective or tainted nature of much of the evidence garnered from fictional sources.²⁴⁷ Yet most historians would agree that all sources contain subjective or unreliable elements, and that these must be factored into any

²⁴⁵ One example of this is establishing that the male writer, Arnold Bennett, is well qualified to write on women partly because of his experience as an editor on an English woman's magazine. See chapter 1 'A History of Women's Emotions Using the Novels of Bennett and Corelli' for more details on the career backgrounds of both Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli.

²⁴⁶ Hill, pp. 196-197.

²⁴⁷ For example, Snell comments that there is no 'precautionary schema' or 'literary sociology' set down for the use of literature in historical study. (Snell, p. 374.) And Laslett, in his article on the employment of insights gleaned from literary sources, implies that historians will find themselves bogged down by what he claims to be the 'theory-laden' activity required to glean this evidence. (Laslett, pp. 324-325.)

intended system of approach or method of use.²⁴⁸ The claim made by Tosh, then, that historians have to provide for the personal biases or prejudices of novelists when examining their literature also obviously applies to those working with other forms of historical evidence.²⁴⁹ Moreover, with the increasing use of substantial fictional insights in history writing, consensus between historians over method will doubtless grow.

The approach to deriving valuable historical evidence from novels that this thesis adopts is certainly less complex and convoluted than Laslett's perception of it as a 'theory-laden' activity.²⁵⁰ This is not to say that accessing a community's *mentalité* or 'psyche' through the examination of its popular fiction is a straightforward or easy task. Simply, that the techniques here employed to analyse critically fictional texts for what they contain in the way of historical insight is not so far removed from the techniques used by many historians to examine other forms of evidence including, as has been said, journals, diaries and personal, or even official, correspondence.

²⁴⁸ Two such historians, for example, are Hill and Himmelfarb. Hill believes that 'official documents' can be subjected to similar criticisms as fictional sources. (Hill, p. 196.) Himmelfarb expresses a similar viewpoint in her study of the idea of poverty. In reference to sources such as 'the commission reports, newspaper accounts, tracts, and broadsheets' which are 'to one degree or another removed from the reality', she writes: 'If the novel cannot be taken as historical evidence *tout court*, neither can these other sources; it might even be salutary if all sources were seen as, in some sense and in some measure, fictional, to be used warily, skeptically, critically, but also appreciatively.' (Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, p. 405.)

²⁴⁹ Tosh, p. 61. Indeed, as Raphael Samuel points out, historians themselves incorporate subjective elements into their writing. He argues that in spite of efforts to present history without bias or anachronism, for example, 'we are in fact constantly reinterpreting the past in light of the present, and indeed, like conservatives and restorationists in other spheres, reinventing it. The angle of vision is inescapably contemporary, however remote the object in view'. Samuel adds further that any 'refusal to countenance any traffic between the imaginary and the real – is impossible, in practice, to sustain'. 'Silences' and 'gaps' within the written record often can only be filled in with inference – 'if only for the sake of a continuous narrative'. (Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, vol. 1, *Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, Verso, London and New York, 1994, pp.430-431.) Keith Windschuttle, in *The Killing of History*, adds that the subjective elements of history texts are widely acknowledged characteristics of historical study now. (Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How a Discipline is Being Murdered by Literary Critics and Social Theorists*, MacLeay, Paddington, Sydney, 1994, p. 230.)

²⁵⁰ Again, see Laslett, pp. 324-325, for an elaboration of these concerns.

In the first place, a text can often support the legitimacy or reliability of a particular insight through repetition, which quite simply involves examining the text for the reiteration of ideas and occurrences. The importance of the weight of this evidence is strengthened or rendered much more reliable if this repetition is found to be consistent between other novels by the same author or by different novelists in the same period. Himmelfarb, for instance, argues that historians can concentrate their attention on certain passages within a particular novel, but only if the rest of the novel attests to the importance, value and meaning of that specific passage.²⁵¹ Although the focus of Robert Druce's study is considerably different to that of this thesis, he employs a similar concept. In his inquiry into the bestselling success of Enid Blyton and Ian Fleming, he uses the theories of Karlheinz Stierle to support his view that repetition within these popular novels reinforces the signification of the situations they depict and the values that they express in the minds of their readers. Stierle argues that the story 'affirms itself by recurrences'. Druce then comments that:

Within each Blyton or Fleming story, the elements of the plot pattern predict, reflect, complete, and confirm one another. So do the narrative concepts, and the elements of the underlying *mythos*. For anyone who has once read a Blyton or a Fleming novel, each reading of another book in the canon is a return to familiar ground, and further affirmations.²⁵²

This formula applies much more closely to the bestselling novels of Marie Corelli than to the less widely read novels of Arnold Bennett. Nevertheless, within Bennett's books, historians can certainly accumulate enough 'recurrences' of situations and repetition of ideas to detect affirmations of values and interests – those shared between author and audience. These recurrences are just more subtly presented in Bennett's middlebrow fiction than in Corelli's more popular novels.

²⁵¹ She further comments that, of course, in other instances a particular passage may be of little consequence, either to the historian or to the contemporary reader. (Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, p. 407.)

²⁵² Druce, pp. 295-296.

The authenticity or legitimacy of ideas and values reinforced or affirmed by repetition within these texts is still valid and valuable to historians even if they are neither supported by existing conventional historical documents nor mentioned in them. Indeed, it is in such cases that fictional evidence is most effectively used – in helping to fill in the ‘gaps’ or ‘silences’ in the existing historical record.

For many historians, the analysis of the fictional text does not end here, however. Those attempting to construct a community’s mindset – a general worldview – must look beyond the words written on the page to what is only implied. Different systems of values or conventions can be detected within each community or society.²⁵³ The author and audience, sharing the same world, also share knowledge of the values and conventions of that world. This knowledge is so familiar that it is frequently assumed as implicit or tacitly understood. The relationship between the writer and the reader is often such that this does not need to be drawn out. As the historian, Bernard Bailyn, explains:

The past is not only distant, it is in various ways a different world. The basic experiences are different from ours, yet they seemed to the people who experienced them to be so normal that they did not record things that we would consider to be strange and particularly interesting.²⁵⁴

Whereas Laslett contends that these absences are another complexity in the historical analysis of a work of fiction, Bernard Bailyn and Lionel Trilling argue that they are invaluable assets in the study of mentalities.²⁵⁵ In particular reference

²⁵³ Rockwell, p. 33.

²⁵⁴ Bailyn cites sanitation as an example. Bernard Bailyn, *On the Teachings and Writings of History. Responses to a Series of Questions*, Edward Connery Lathem (ed.), Montgomery Endowment Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, (Distributed by the University of New England), 1994, p. 52.

²⁵⁵ Laslett, in a footnote to the main text of his article, writes that it ‘is not impossible that a feature of society can be so commonplace that it is almost never worth drawing attention to in high literature, so that appearances there might conceivably be *inversely* related to frequency in the population.’ (Laslett, p. 342.) Its absence, or frequency of absence, is valuable to historians attempting to access general attitudes that are so familiar as to be knowledge assumed between writer and reader – absences that will be apparent to the informed modern reader. It is what is

to a study of Arnold Bennett's novels, for instance, even more so than of Corelli's, consideration is certainly given to what readers today may interpret as silences or absences, but that readers in the early twentieth century would no doubt have tacitly understood.

Trilling refers to these unwritten conventions as the 'manners' of a society, the unseen, unvoiced 'great distracting buzz of implication' – similar to what Bailyn terms the 'hubbub' of an era.²⁵⁶ Trilling believes that in order to understand any society (and by inference any novel which is a product of that society) the historian needs to have access to 'a culture's hum and buzz of implication':

I mean the whole evanescent context in which its explicit statements are made up of half-uttered or unuttered or unutterable expressions of value. They are hinted at by small actions, sometimes by the arts of dress or decoration, sometimes by tone, gesture, emphasis, or rhythm, sometimes by the words that are used with a special [frequency] or a special meaning. They are the things that for good or bad draw the people of a culture together and that separate them from the people of another culture. They make the part of a culture which is not art, or religion, or morals, or politics, and yet it relates to all these highly formulated departments of culture. It is modified by them; it modifies them; it is generated by them; it generates them. In this part of culture assumption rules, which is often so much stronger than reason.²⁵⁷

The gaps of understanding or familiarity that modern readers detect in turn-of-the-century fiction, the knowledge assumed of the contemporary reader but not of those distanced from the society in which the text was constructed, form this 'hum

referred to by these absences, the attitudes and values of the general public, that render fictional insights so valuable to historians, rather than simply any mentioning of material reality.

²⁵⁶ Trilling, p. 206; and Bailyn, *On the Teaching and Writing of History*, p. 76-77. This concept has already been referred to in footnote 31, p. 73.

and buzz'. Furthermore, Himmelfarb contends that this 'hum and buzz' is to be found in nineteenth-century novels far more so than in novels today – novels being a much more popular and familiar medium of expression then than now.²⁵⁸ And, as Rockwell also contends, in order for any other society to identify with a fictional work, 'there must be enough cultural similarity to make sympathy and understanding possible' – a factor that recommends fiction to historians.²⁵⁹

Identifying and analysing a society's system of manners and conventions is certainly not an easy task for historians to undertake. Therefore, Trilling advises historians of culture to gather as much detail about the society as possible, before trying to access and understand its complexities. It is not just a simple matter of digging out one set of 'manners' – 'in any complex culture there is not a single system of manners but a conflicting variety of manners'.²⁶⁰ Novels mirror these complexities of 'manners'. As records of individual experiences, even if imaginatively constructed – what Bailyn calls 'interior subjective experiences'²⁶¹ – novels are uniquely qualified to constitute part of this collection of 'detail' to which Trilling refers.

For historians analysing a community's *mentalité*, for those searching for Trilling's 'hum and buzz', novels are an ideal source. Attempting to ascertain the assumptions and values held by an audience through a work of fiction involves historians approaching the literary text in question as a narrative – as an encoded language, as a discourse.²⁶² To gain access to what is not explicitly stated but

²⁵⁷ Trilling, pp. 206-207.

²⁵⁸ Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, p. 403.

²⁵⁹ Rockwell, p. 80. Rockwell too illustrates the existence of Trilling's 'buzz of implication' in fictional works – with reference to Laura Bohannon's (1966) *Shakespeare in the Bush*. Rockwell recounts how Bohannon found it impossible to make Hamlet understandable to people with whom she was studying in Africa. African values and customs were too different to allow African people to identify with Shakespeare's implied assumptions. For instance, African custom expresses a belief that a widow should marry immediately, and preferably her dead husband's brother – a belief that rocks the entire foundation of the play's morality. (Rockwell, p. 78.)

²⁶⁰ Trilling, p. 207.

²⁶¹ Bailyn, *On the Teaching and Writing of History*, pp. 19-20.

²⁶² Allen, p. 245; and Dominik La Capra, *History and Criticism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1985, p. 126.

rather implied, to what is ‘inscribed’ in a written text, historians bear the responsibility of establishing their own strategies for reading beyond what is simply written.²⁶³ This ‘methodological challenge’, as referred to by Allen, is not as daunting or intimidating as it appears to some.²⁶⁴ As with any historical source, there are a number of fundamental tasks required before the fullest possible use can be made of the evidence to be yielded – before historians can gain further understanding of the era they are reconstructing.

Therefore, as has been argued, this thesis supports the view that to best understand the complexities of the encoded messages or assumptions contained within the fictional narratives, especially in popular novels, involves approaching the text in question with a solid familiarity with the society in which the text was produced; knowledge of the novelist to ensure that they are qualified to act as a voice of their era and their chosen subject; and, as far as possible, a composite picture of the readership.

This is not to say that the method proposed here is that which is adopted by all who use novels for their historical insight. Nor even that any one method need be used consistently in a historical study employing various forms of fictional evidence. Indeed, there is no one established or definitive method of using fiction as a historical source. However, Alison Light advises against approaching these ‘documents’ in too tentative a manner. She maintains that the best way to use these sources for the purpose of mining past mindsets is not simply to ‘interrogate’ or ‘grill’ the novel – to hold the novel at arm’s length like the ‘critic’ (for fear of being found ‘complicit’). Rather, she argues, historians would benefit from delving into the novel – to attempt to understand how past readers were both ‘reached and touched’.²⁶⁵ Consequently, Light established her own system of approach. She admits freely that there is little continuity or consistency between

²⁶³ Allen, p. 246; and Trilling, p. 205.

²⁶⁴ Namely historians such as Adylotte and Laslett who comment that they find the lack of established methodology or at least strategy for dealing with the evidence to be gleaned from literary sources an obstacle in the way of further employing this source.

the types of texts she has chosen to study, nor in the kinds of examinations that she applies to these different novels. Her different chapters, she writes, support

different modes of analysis; they move unashamedly between the techniques of an older style of literary criticism, with its attention to language and to readerly response, and a critical practice which believes that not only must we look beyond the words on the page for their fuller meaning, but that being different readers, inconstant creatures of time and place, we can never finalise our understanding.²⁶⁶

For the purposes of this thesis, it should be reiterated that there is also a slight variation of approach expected of historians analysing more than one type of fiction. For instance, whereas Bennett's more middlebrow works of fiction require the modern reader's skills in seeking out much of value which is implied, though not necessarily stated, concerning the emotional predisposition of the audience, novels such as those by the phenomenally popular Marie Corelli are so blatantly didactic (often following a very clear set of moral criteria) that they leave little unsaid – or rather unwritten. And often the outcomes of Corelli's plots reveal more about her audience's expectations than her heavily repetitive, sometimes contradictory prose. A commonsense approach to fictional texts, as well as an informed understanding of their place in their contemporary society and of their targeted audience, are all necessary ingredients for their effective use as highly revealing historical sources.

Concerns about verifying the details offered by fiction still remain. Laslett, for example, argues that historians can certainly look to fiction for confirmation or illustration but, when it comes to using their insights unsupported by other sources,

²⁶⁵ Light, p. x.

²⁶⁶ Light, p. ix.

then the details they yield are ‘problematic’, ‘mysterious’, and ‘intriguing’.²⁶⁷ But, to approach the use of fiction in too cautious a manner – to demand that it should have only, or even primarily, an illustrative function, because of the argument that its subjective elements render it too difficult for historians to access its valuable insights – is to waste and misuse the source. Fiction’s greatest contributions to the study of history are those significations that cannot be found elsewhere, or that are, at least, rarely found elsewhere.²⁶⁸ Popular novels are an invaluable source to turn to for historians studying interior lives – an area of historical analysis into which relatively few other available documents present a pathway or even a peephole. As with any evidence used to help fill in the ‘gaps’ or ‘silences’ in existing historical narratives, the insights offered by fiction are often unverified by the more conventional historical sources. This is not to say that such evidence should enter into historical narrative or discourse unchecked or unquestioned. On the contrary, even where few other comparable sources are to be found, fictional insights can still be tested to some extent.

Fictional evidence must provide a plausible contribution to the reconstruction of a past reality – it must fit with what the historian already knows of the era and society under scrutiny.²⁶⁹ Again, this is not to say that the evidence offered has to conform to all that the historian knows of this area of the past – certainly it can challenge or contend with existing narratives. But it has to strike the informed historian as a possible and plausible, even likely, element. The weight of the evidence found within the text must comply with what is known outside of it.

This thesis does not recommend that historians base their histories on fiction alone.²⁷⁰ Most historians come to the text armed with prior knowledge of the

²⁶⁷ Laslett, p. 328.

²⁶⁸ This idea is supported by La Capra, *History and Criticism*, p. 126. Also see Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, p. 403.

²⁶⁹ Snell argues that history writing relying only on literary sources frequently lacks ‘caution, independent confirmation from other sources, and a defined or properly limited social focus’. (Snell, p. 375.)

²⁷⁰ Laslett warns against the idea of using literary evidence unsupported by other sources. (Laslett, pp. 322-323.)

period and society being analysed. It is in *combination* with this knowledge, then, that novels are best employed. Only by familiarity with the more conventional historical sources can historians identify the ‘gaps’ or ‘silences’ that exist – those that fiction may help to fill in or flesh out.

Section B

What 'to do'

The impetus for this section comes from a recorded conversation between the young and impatient Sophia Baines and her more staid and conservative mother in Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908). The extent of the generation, as well as the personality, gap existing between Sophia and Mrs Baines is exposed in a discussion concerning what a young daughter is expected to do once her school days are over. Much of this difference in attitude is revealed by the use of the word 'do' and the divergent understandings of this term in the minds of the two women. Sophia's response, after her mother informs her and that she and her sister, Constance, are soon to leave school, is to ask Mrs Baines what she is now to 'do'. Her mother's reply is to very briefly outline the anticipated role of a dutiful daughter:

'I hope that both of you will do what you can to help your mother – and father....'

'Yes', said Sophia, irritated. "But what am I going to *do*?'²⁷¹

Mrs Baines automatically assumes that attending to her filial duties will fulfil her daughter's life. But Sophia is entirely unsatisfied – her qualms are far from placated. Instead, she emerges from the conversation, irritated and frustrated. To 'do' assumes a much more active dimension in her mind. It has links with ideas of an occupation or a career, however vague or as yet unformed these notions might be. Her ambitions do not conform to her mother's expectation that her daughters will work in the family drapers shop but, rather, are much more geared towards an understanding of her own individuality and to following her personal inclinations.

This brief, yet critical, episode in Bennett's novel reveals a substantial degree of tension existing between different conceptions of unmarried middle-class women's

²⁷¹ Arnold Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, Edinburgh, n.d. [1908], p. 37.

lives. Moreover, the obvious generation gap between the two protagonists in this scene allows Bennett to trace the development of a shift in mindset – one concerned specifically with the issues of purpose and self-worth as they relate to individual women's lives.

This question of how unmarried middle-class women were to spend their time directs the form and content of the chapters included within this section of the thesis. 'Learning for Life' is a relatively short chapter that is intended primarily as an introduction to the rest of the section in that it deals with the issue of how girls were trained or educated for the roles that they were expected to assume later in life. (The length of this chapter mirrors the limited extent to which Bennett and Corelli directly address this subject in their fiction.) The following chapter, 'The Business of Domesticity', examines the manner in which each of these popular writers portrayed the occupation in which – despite significant social changes – a large majority of Late Victorian and Edwardian middle-class women were still engaged. And, finally, 'Employment and Careers' addresses changing perceptions of middle-class women's involvement in paid employment. Relatively few middle-class women were in paid employment during this period and the popular novels studied here make only a handful of direct references to careers. But, where employment is mentioned, the observations passed and comments made prove to be highly pertinent – and relevant to the considerable public discussion of this issue at the time.

This section argues that the 'myth of the idle woman', a concept that was especially applicable to middle-class women, whether married or unmarried, was precisely that – a myth. However, the weight of evidence in these three chapters demonstrates that, although attitudes towards middle-class women and the manner in which they occupied their time were in marked transition, more traditional notions concerning the role of the female within the home continued to hold sway.

Chapter 3

Learning for Life

The novels of Bennett and Corelli usually centre on young women of post-school age. Therefore, each novelist rarely refers directly to the mode of education that their characters received as girls. But, whereas Bennett remarks on the everyday effects of learning on the minds and lives of his female characters, Corelli confines herself to making a limited number of bold or dramatic statements about controversial topics such as higher education and the New Woman.²⁷² Because of this, this chapter deals more extensively with Bennett's treatment of the topic, than with Corelli's. What this chapter then revolves around is not the very topical nineteenth-century issue of education itself, but rather a number of issues closely related to middle-class girls' learning at the turn of the twentieth century, including: how these young women used their education in young adulthood and in womanhood; the idea of further education and further self-education – a prevalent turn-of-the-century concern, but one that affected only a handful of Late Victorian and Edwardian women; and the wider or more general issue of morality as it related to girls' learning – of how much they were allowed to know in view of rigidly idealised notions concerning womanhood prevailing in their society.

This relatively short chapter is intended primarily as an introduction to the more substantial chapters focusing on domesticity and on employment. As such it only briefly addresses, and sometimes ignores, many of Late Victorian and Edwardian society's widely discussed educational issues. It does not, for example, discuss the vigorous contemporary debates regarding the content of school curricula in any great detail. Nor does it outline the late nineteenth-century campaigns pushing for advances in women's education. Rather, its concerns lie along more general lines, resting more with how a girl's education was moulded to help to prepare her for her expected roles in life, namely those of wife, mother and housekeeper, and on

²⁷² For an introduction to the concept of the New Woman, see chapter 'A History of Women's Emotions Using the Novels of Bennett and Corelli', pp. 11-20.

the very obvious relationship existing between girls' learning and feminine idealism. In this way, this chapter really addresses only the more general concerns voiced, or at least hinted at, in the popular novels of Bennett and Corelli.

Examining the novels of these two authors, as well as recently published history writing in the area, confirms that educational advancements, including the partial opening up of tertiary education to women, did help to create a new space for middle-class women in Late Victorian and Edwardian society, even if it did so only very slowly. These advancements affected only relatively few women, but they did have some effect on public perceptions of what were thought to be appropriate modes of female learning and female occupations. However, such an investigation also showed that an overwhelming majority of women were trained for their future position in the domestic sphere. Developments in women's education taking place throughout the nineteenth century were not necessarily – often not at all – directed towards securing employment in the public domain, but rather at improving a woman's 'performance' in the private sphere. And throughout the Victorian and the Edwardian years, notions of protecting a woman's sense of morality and sheltering her from too much worldly knowledge were concerns that were not confined to girlhood but ones that were carried into adulthood. Together, these popular novels demonstrate that the strong links existing between learning, morality and feminine idealism were still points of lively and wide discussion in the Late Victorian era and further into the early twentieth century.

Many recent historians studying middle class education for girls in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century have emphasised the area's complex and diverse nature.²⁷³ Education for the middle classes took on a variety of meanings.

²⁷³ For example, see the works of Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women*, New York University Press, New York, 1993; Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, Boston and Henley, 1981; and J. N. Burstyn, *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood*, Croom Helm, London, 1980.

Not only, for example, did the task of educating girls, and boys for that matter, refer to academic learning – subjects such as sciences, languages and English – it also included the duty of educating and preparing their characters for the future role their society had mapped out for them.

Recent historians agree that for much of the nineteenth century most girls received little or no school education.²⁷⁴ Indeed, it was not until the 1880s that it became compulsory for both girls and boys to attend elementary schools.²⁷⁵ Middle and upper-class girls, however, were more likely to acquire an education of some form, although, as Joan Burstyn notes, for some girls, especially those from the middle-class, this education could only be described as ‘sporadic’ - many attended to their schooling only when nothing of greater priority was engaging them.²⁷⁶

Given that a middle-class woman’s place was overwhelmingly deemed to be in the home, a home-based education was considered to be the most desirable form of middle-class female learning throughout the nineteenth century. However, in view of the fact that well-qualified governesses and tutors were difficult to find and expensive to hire, and that this situation worsened as the century progressed, this ideal option could only have been afforded by those from the wealthy sections of the middle classes.²⁷⁷ In place of home-based educations, however, middle-class girls’ schools tended to be small and intimate establishments – an obvious attempt to imitate the security and familiarity of middle-class family life.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁴ Perkin, p. 27; and Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 3.

²⁷⁵ Although, as Perkin points out, the establishment of a state system of free, compulsory education for all only came about in stages, mostly between 1870 and 1880, though some regions of England received it even later than this. Perkin, p. 48.

²⁷⁶ Burstyn, p. 22.

²⁷⁷ Perkin, p. 32; Burstyn, p. 24; and J. Rowbotham, *Good Girls Make Good Wives. Guidance for Girls in Victorian Fiction*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989, p. 132. Rowbotham also points to the added burden for parents of talented girls in the provinces who were finding it difficult to come across highly rated tutors, especially qualified masters required to polish the standards of the more feminine accomplishments that had been acquired in areas such as art, music and foreign languages. Such difficulties may have led to girls from rural backgrounds being sent to boarding schools in the larger urban centres, most especially London. See Rowbotham, p. 133.

²⁷⁸ Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 46.

The form that a middle-class girl's education assumed depended on her family's position within that social class. For example, wealthier middle-class families, in addition to a home-based education, also had the option available of sending their daughters to exclusive day schools or to 'fashionable' boarding schools.²⁷⁹ (And it can be assumed, for example, that the majority of Marie Corelli's often wealthy female protagonists were educated in one of these ways.) On the other hand, girls from the middle levels of the middle classes (the merchant and professional classes) tended to live under the charge of a nurse or a governess until ten years old – if the family could afford one. For the next two to three years it was likely that they attended a private day school, followed, perhaps from the age of thirteen to seventeen years old, by time spent at a fashionable boarding school. After their formal schooling, daughters were expected to return home or to spend one more year at a 'finishing' school.²⁸⁰ However, girls from the lower middle classes, from families earning between £100 and £300 per year, could not afford to send their daughters even to the least expensive of the existing boarding schools.²⁸¹ The most likely alternatives available then were the local day schools – either privately established or voluntary church schools. According to Burstyn these voluntary church schools had been intended to educate children from the lower or working classes but many lower middle class families used them also, especially where the class difference existing was very fine, as it was in many cases. Later, if funds could be found, such an educational experience might be concluded by attending a 'finishing' school – where 'dancing, music, and other refinements' could be learnt.²⁸² Moreover, a portion of the lower middle classes could afford to and did send their daughters to local day schools – schools that may not have been so class-ambiguous. Whatever educational institution they attended, girls from this social level were expected to spend their first ten years at home, doubtless helping with household duties, and to experience a formal education for about four or five

²⁷⁹ Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 40; and Burstyn, p. 24.

²⁸⁰ Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 42; and Perkin, p. 32.

²⁸¹ Perkin, p. 32; and Burstyn, p. 24.

²⁸² Burstyn, p. 24.

years, leaving anywhere between the ages of thirteen and seventeen years old, at which time they would be expected to then stay at home and concentrate on fulfilling their social duties.²⁸³ (Most of Bennett's female characters hail from the lower-middle- and middle classes, and their schooling conformed accordingly.)

This is not to say that the range of educational opportunities open to middle-class girls remained entirely static throughout Victorian and Edwardian England. Between the 1850s and 1870s, for example, new types of private day and boarding schools were established – educational institutions that catered for changing social and economic conditions, responding to the rising number of women entering the workforce and to an increasing acceptance of girls' intellectual capabilities. These schools were financed mainly by business and professional men who, for the most part, wanted educated and cultured wives and daughters. However, these changes really only affected a very small proportion of middle-class girls.²⁸⁴ The bulk of lower-middle-class daughters received a type of education that prevailed from the second half of the nineteenth century to the onset of the First World War.²⁸⁵

As has been said, Victorian education concentrated on much more than academic learning. Maria Grey, founder of the Women's Education Union and the Girls' Public Day School Company, and one of the most prolific writers on education in the Victorian period, typically defined education for both boys and girls as 'moral and intellectual' training.²⁸⁶ Indeed, the task of building character, Rowbotham argues, was the primary goal of nineteenth-century education – without the training for 'social usefulness', she contends, all else learnt at school was

²⁸³ Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 42.

²⁸⁴ Perkin, p. 35.

²⁸⁵ Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 42.

²⁸⁶ In Felicity Hunt, 'Divided Aims: The Educational Implications of Opposing Ideologies in Girls' Secondary Schooling, 1850-1940', in Felicity Hunt (ed.), *Lessons For Life. The Schooling of Girls and Women, 1850-1950*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford and New York, 1987, pp. 3-21, p. 5. Rowbotham too points out that the morality and character-building components of education were essentially genderless, whether in the middle of the nineteenth century or at the beginning of the twentieth century. See Rowbotham, p. 101.

considered worthless.²⁸⁷ This emphasis did not change much throughout the Victorian and the Edwardian periods. And even though newer types of girls' schools were gradually introduced into England in the later decades of the nineteenth century, the 'major thrust' of female education – that of character development – did not alter. The typical curriculum of a female educational institution certainly reflected this.²⁸⁸ Such a curriculum also reflected what was widely thought of as the Victorian and Edwardian middle-class woman's primary role in life – a life in the private sphere.

Nineteenth-century women were expected to sharpen their domestic skills by following this teaching, as well as by following that set by their mothers' example and their instructions. And again, even though nineteenth-century society was undergoing certain changes, for example an increased number of middle-class women entered into the workforce, the general expectation that young women who did so would one day assume their place as wife, mother and housekeeper within the home did not alter. This is not to argue that a number of girls' schools did not reflect this shift; they did. Nor was the era void of discussion or controversy over the contents of a girl's education, for it was not.²⁸⁹ While some topics of study, such as literature and music, fell naturally within the accepted female sphere, others raised some doubts – such as the classical languages. Rowbotham expands,

Certain subjects were unquestionably considered to be within the female educational compass, with clear applications to the domestic sphere, including English, both grammar and literature, arithmetic, general information via the medium of history and geography, and modern languages. Music and drawing were considered accomplishments rather than academic subjects, at least for the vast majority of girls.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁷ Rowbotham, p. 101-102.

²⁸⁸ Rowbotham, p. 140.

²⁸⁹ For example, see Rowbotham, p. 118.

²⁹⁰ Rowbotham, p. 118.

Added to this was the acceptance of a growing list of sporting activities for women – exercises such as callisthenics and other forms of gymnasium-style exercise that were ‘designed to develop feminine stamina aiding deportment and grace, without overdeveloping feminine muscle’.²⁹¹ Such activities were still seen to be supportive of the feminine stereotype.²⁹² Even more vigorous team sports such as hockey, lacrosse and cricket grew in acceptance – especially with the growth of larger girls’ schools and with the increasing involvement of women in higher education. Such competitive team sports were seen as building up the necessary stamina and spirit (labelled ‘pluck’ in much of the existing girls’ fiction) for school life – thereby contributing to the common goal of building character.²⁹³

Much of what Rowbotham says here on the subject of girls’ education, however, relates most directly to the relatively few newer forms of girls’ schools. The type of education that girls from the lower and middle levels of the middle classes were more likely to have received is similar to that which is referred to in the novels of Arnold Bennett. In *The Old Wives’ Tale*, for example, Bennett outlines the prospectus offered by Miss Chetwynd’s school – a relatively small provincial establishment set up in the mid-nineteenth century:

Her prospectus talked about ‘a sound and religious course of training’, ‘study embracing the usual branches of English, with music by a talented master, drawing, dancing, and calisthenics’. Also ‘needlework plain and ornamental’; also ‘moral influence’; and finally about terms, ‘which are very moderate, and every particular, with

²⁹¹ Rowbotham, p. 123. Joan Perkin also makes reference to gymnastics as a favoured form of exercise in the new schools for girls, for example, Cheltenham Ladies College and the North London Collegiate School. See Perkin, p. 37.

²⁹² In their article on women’s underwear and the rise of women’s sports, Janet and Peter Phillips argue that when women did engage in established sporting activities, the structure of the sports themselves were amended to suit the expectations of ‘ladylike’ behaviour from female participants. For instance, women contestants were hardly expected to move at all in order to make their ‘shots’. This article demonstrates this, arguing that: ‘Even in tennis, it was considered unladylike to run and so the game was usually played with three or four partners on each side of the net’. Janet and Peter Phillips, ‘History from Below: Women’s Underwear and the Rise of Women’s Sports’, *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1973, pp. 129-148, p. 130.

references, to parents and others, furnished on application.’²⁹⁴

In *Helen with the High Hand*, published and set in 1910, Bennett offers little indication that the content of a girl’s education has undergone any form of change. Helen’s elderly uncle, James Ollerenshaw, thinks of his niece as ‘an extraordinary, an amazing creature’ when he learns that she teaches ‘everything’ – sewing, cooking and mathematics. In the comical spirit of the novel, Bennett’s wry rejoinder is:

Nothing of the kind. There are simply thousands of agreeable and good girls who can accomplish herring-bone, omelettes, and simultaneous equations in a breath, as it were. They are all over the kingdom, and may be seen in the streets and lanes thereof about half-past eight in the morning and again about five o’clock in the evening. But the fact is not generally known. Only the stern and *blasé* members of School Boards or Education Committees know it. And they are so used to marvels that they make nothing of them.²⁹⁵

And, of course, Helen’s skills as a teacher are far from extraordinary. Hers are the usual requirements expected of the growing number of female teachers spilling into low paying, low prestige positions in elementary schools at the turn of the century.

What is telling about Bennett’s examples is the apparent lack of dramatic change between the mid-Victorian and early twentieth century in the content of girl’s learning and the standard required of the teachers entrusted with their education. Furthermore, the fact that the school that the young Constance and Sophia Baines attend in the 1860s – Miss Chetwynd’s school (*The Old Wives’ Tale*) – is the same establishment which Janet Orgreave and Hilda Lessways (*Hilda Lessways*) attend

²⁹³ Rowbotham, p. 124.

²⁹⁴ Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, Edinburgh, n.d. [1908], p. 62.

nearly fifty years later can be taken as symbolic of the largely unchanged nature of middle-class female learning.

Bennett's female protagonists display the effects of their learning in a variety of ways. This popular author recognises, for example, that education manifests itself in the everyday activities of typical middle-class women. These are women who are primarily confined to the domestic sphere and so who are offered few other tangible outlets for putting their education to use – unlike men of a similar rank who have the opportunity of practising their learning in their business or professional lives. The level of education achieved by the women in Bennett's novels is often evidenced, therefore, in their reading novels and poetry; keeping household accounts; taking part in literary or political discussions; and in more mundane or everyday duties such as cooking and sewing.

References to and everyday images of women successfully carrying out household tasks permeate Bennett's fiction – demonstrating the widespread acquisition of domestic skills, whether through some kind of formal education or through example set at home. However, Bennett also makes more specific reference to school learning, such as the act of reading mentioned previously. It is taken for granted that most, if not all, of Bennett's middle-class female characters have the ability to read, and indeed, many of them have a preference for this way of occupying themselves. Hilda Lessways, readers are informed, is driven to passionate outbursts after reading Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame* and Tennyson's *Maud*; Sophia Baines goes out of her way to get her hands on a copy of Miss Sewell's *Experience of Life*; Constance Baines and her mother, we are told, read only a few chosen texts, including *The Sunday at Home*; Maggie Clayhanger possesses a ticket for the Free Library; as does Anna Tellwright – although little insight is given into precisely what she reads.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁵ Bennett, *Helen With the High Hand*, Alan Sutton, Gloucester, 1983 [1910], p. 19.

²⁹⁶ Arnold Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1976 [1911], p. 148 and p. 11; Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 106; Arnold Bennett, *Clayhanger*, Penguin,

In addition to reading skills, Bennett also demonstrates that many of his novels' middle-class women have acquired a fundamental grasp of mathematics. The twelve year old Agnes Tellwright is portrayed working at her mathematical homework.²⁹⁷ Her older sister, Anna, handles the money that her father gives her for the housekeeping – a responsibility that indubitably requires a measure of mathematical ability. That Anna is entirely out of her depth when dealing with substantial investments that her father has made in her name and that she is afraid of handling the cheque books that enable her to access these funds only indicate her unfamiliarity with the male-dominated world of business and finance, and have no bearing on her grasp of basic mathematics.²⁹⁸ Similarly, Hilda Lessways finds that she is useful in keeping a record of George Cannon's boarding house accounts, even if she is ignorant about the details concerning Cannon's investment of her own money.²⁹⁹ Helen Rathbone (*Helen With the High Hand*) and Ruth Earp (*The Card*) are portrayed as single women who earn their living through teaching (elementary school and dancing, respectively) even if, in line with the humorous tone adopted in each novel, both are presented as being financially extravagant.³⁰⁰ Sophia Baines single-handedly manages a series of extremely successful boarding houses in Paris – proving that she is a very astute businesswoman.³⁰¹ And before this, both Sophia and Constance Baines are expected to take over from their parents in managing the family business – a millinery shop – a position that doubtless requires substantial skills dealing with fundamental mathematics and with money.³⁰²

Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1975 [1910], p. 307; and Arnold Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, Wordsworth Classics, Hertfordshire, 1994 [1902], p. 13.

²⁹⁷ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 20 and p. 75.

²⁹⁸ For example, see Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 24, p. 27 and p. 33.

²⁹⁹ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 210 and pp. 125-127.

³⁰⁰ Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, p. 21 and Arnold Bennett, *The Card. A Story of Adventure in the Five Towns*, Methuen, London, 1964 [1911], pp. 54-56 and pp. 78-79.

³⁰¹ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 443 and pp. 479-480.

³⁰² Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 38.

Teaching, another form of employment taken up by middle-class women in Bennett's novels, also requires a sound educational background. Whether as a casual Sunday-school teacher, like Anna Tellwright, or as a primary school teacher, like Helen Rathbone and Sophia Baines (Sophia begins teacher training but does not complete it), a substantial degree of learning is evident.

Employment aside, a fortunate group of middle-class women also found an outlet for learning in learned and cultured familial settings – in homes where discussion and debate were encouraged. Although, it has to be said that there are not many examples of this in Bennett's mostly provincial novels. A majority of Bennett's families are from the lower ranks of the middle classes – and theirs were lifestyles that are not as conducive to leisurely meetings and lively debates such as those often witnessed in more affluent middle-class homes. The most prominent example of the lively and learned atmosphere referred to here is that in the Orgreave household in Bennett's 1910 novel, *Clayhanger*. Both Hilda Lessways and Edwin Clayhanger, themselves from less cultured familial backgrounds, benefit from the discussions taking place under the Orgreave roof. Each experiences a desire to participate in these debates, to demonstrate their learning and express their opinions, only a lack of self-confidence sometimes intrudes to dampen their intentions.³⁰³

Due to her grandfather's fondness and her father's vanity, Hilda Lessways attends a school where the girls are, on average, 'a little above herself in station'.³⁰⁴ This is where she meets and becomes lifelong friends with Janet Orgreave. Janet introduces Hilda to a more learned home and social environment than that which she shares with her widowed mother. There is no evidence of fervent literary and political discussions taking place in Hilda's home, as there is in Janet's. What this example points to is not only the idea that education, especially the choice of school, could influence a girl's social standing, but also that the quantity and

³⁰³ For example, see Bennett, *Clayhanger*, Book II, ch. 7, pp. 185-196 and ch. 8, pp. 197-201; and *Hilda Lessways*, Book II, ch. 4, pp. 138-145.

quality of the influence of home life on girls' learning varied critically from family to family. As Dyhouse points out once formal schooling was over and a girl returned home permanently, any further educational progress she made depended on the cultural tenor of her parent's home, the books at her disposal and her parents' circle of friends. A small handful of middle-class girls were privileged with being in the midst of extraordinarily stimulating intellectual environments.³⁰⁵

A young woman's learning was not confined to her school years – it did not end when her formal education did. Emphasis on character-building and on a sense of morality continued into recreational time – as the era's concern with leisurely reading indicates.³⁰⁶ As reading increased as a pastime for middle-class women, so too did late Victorian society's emphasis on the need for censorship.³⁰⁷ As literacy became more widespread and as the literary market expanded to cater for this newly swollen readership, moral control over the type of reading material available became more and more difficult.³⁰⁸ Furthermore, the very mid-Victorian belief that novels were to provide a source of sound instruction as well as of entertainment was increasingly challenged and began to decline.³⁰⁹ Reading, then, was seen more and more as a readily accessible, unstructured means of self-learning – whether desirable or otherwise. But, much of what the newly available forms of literature contained was deemed inappropriate material for girls by more

³⁰⁴ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 50.

³⁰⁵ Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 46. She quotes examples of families with contacts with 'great' minds - from whose visits daughters could benefit (though Dyhouse also points out that such 'minds' were likely to be male and therefore such privileged access would be to male dominated thought). Perkin also refers to the influence of home culture, but she concentrates more on girls from the upper classes. The learning they 'absorbed' from being present when distinguished guests visited was of a somewhat different nature from that of the middle classes. As Perkin contends: 'What upper-class girls thus learned, albeit indirectly, were self-confidence, an ability to rise to any occasion, and an unquestioning belief in their right to rule.' (Perkin, p. 31.)

³⁰⁶ Rowbotham, p. 140.

³⁰⁷ For example, Burstyn argues that: 'More women began to read books and magazines, which, as a result, began to cater to women's interests and sensibilities' (Burstyn, p. 15). The Bryce Commission included reading as one of the primary pastimes of a middle-class girl. (Report of Schools Inquiry Commission, P. P., 1867-1868, vol. XXVIII, ch. VI, p. 826, cited in Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 43.)

³⁰⁸ For example, see opening chapter of thesis on the rise of the reading public and the nature of the new literary market at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.

³⁰⁹ See chapter 6 'Religion and Spirituality', for further reference to this notion.

conservative elements of society – material that was considered harmful or threatening to valued ideals of female innocence. The widespread availability and indeed popularity of didactic fiction for girls at the end of the nineteenth century helps to demonstrate the strong concern many middle-class parents felt concerning the content of their daughters' reading material. The widespread belief that exposure to literature could help shape a child's character – especially if viewed during the young child's formative years – explains the extent to which parents monitored their daughters' reading.³¹⁰

Parents within Arnold Bennett's popular novels certainly attempt to monitor their

daughters' reading. Although, as Bennett points out, controlling the reading material young women come into contact with is not always easy. More outwardly conventional middle-class women, such as Anna Tellwright (*Anna of the Five Towns*) and Maggie Clayhanger (*Clayhanger*) read (as has been noted, they both possess Free Library cards), but little reason, if any, is given to suggest they venture into dangerous reading territory. Neither has a mother to censor their reading, but then neither character seems likely to borrow books that are deemed in any way rebellious or even simply morally dubious.

The Olds Wives' Tale, however, presents a somewhat different story. The novel opens in the 1860s when the Free Library first arrives in the provincial town of Bursley, and therefore when parental censorship really comes into play.³¹¹ Mrs Baines attempts to exercise as much control as possible over her daughters' reading – to the point of even contemplating banning borrowing for the welfare of Sophia and Constance.

If the Free Library had not formed part of the Famous Wedgwood Institution, which had been opened with immense *éclat* by the semi-divine Gladstone; if the first

³¹⁰ Rowbotham, p. 3.

³¹¹ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 105.

book had not been ceremoniously ‘taken out’ of the Free Library by the Chief Bailiff in person – a grandfather of stainless renown – Mrs. Baines would probably have risked her authority in forbidding the Free Library.³¹²

Constance, like Anna and Maggie, presents no trouble on this score. Bennett tells readers that all that she and her mother ever read was *The Sunday at Home*,³¹³ though the drawing-room bookcase contained: ‘scriptural commentaries, Dugdale’s *Gazetteer*, Culpepper’s *Herbal*, and works by Bunyan and Flavius Josephus...’ and also a copy of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.³¹⁴ Sophia, however, contrary to her mother and sister, seeks literary entertainment, and indeed enlightenment, elsewhere than *The Sunday at Home*. She borrows and reads Miss Sewell’s *Experience of Life* – a novel that commends itself to her because of the supposed controversy over its reputation but it proves to be a novel that she eventually finds to be disappointingly bland.³¹⁵

Similarly, Hilda Lessways, almost half a century later, experiences the urge to read controversial material – this time in the form of Tennyson’s *Maud*. *Maud* had a reputation for immorality in Hilda’s town – a reputation that did not discourage her from learning it by heart and reciting it aloud wherever the passion took hold.

Dangerous the book was! Once in reciting it aloud in her room, Hilda had come so near to fainting that she had had to stop and lie down on the bed, until she could convince herself that she was not the male lover crying to his beloved. An astounding and fearful experience, and not to be too lightly renewed! For Hilda Lessways, *Maud* was a source of lovely and exquisite pain.³¹⁶

Although Bennett is not patronising regarding Hilda’s emotional reaction, he does make it clear that it is primarily youth that guides her romantic fantasies.

³¹² Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, p. 105.

³¹³ Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, p. 106.

³¹⁴ Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, p. 106.

³¹⁵ Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, p. 106.

Moreover, like Sophia, Hilda is not without a mother who shows concern for her daughter's learning. But, by using her highly independent and strong-willed nature, Hilda forces her mother to buy her a copy for her birthday, while allowing Mrs Lessways to remain in ignorance as to its reputation.³¹⁷ Hilda's passion for literature does not end here. Bennett also describes a scene in which she dramatically interrupts a conversation between Edwin Clayhanger and the Orgreaves brothers regarding Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame* – an interruption, interestingly, that Edwin Clayhanger considers too 'savage', too 'masculine' even, for a girl – thus illustrating that he, too, was affected by the gender 'divide' in this respect, at least.³¹⁸

Both Hilda and Sophia are headstrong enough to defy, or at least manoeuvre around parental authority concerning literature – in contrast to the more dutiful daughters of the period. But, significantly, even in each of these cases, parental authority is very much an issue, illustrating just how central a concern it was whether in the nineteenth or early twentieth century. Bennett's novels do not rebuke these young women for their avoiding censorship, however he does draw correlation between passionate natures and the making of bad life decisions. Hilda and Sophia both make serious mistakes in respect to choosing husbands – mistakes whose consequences they live with for the rest of their lives. There is nothing in these books to say that these decisions were influenced by their choice of reading material. But there is a definite link between their preference for 'unsuitable' literature and their desire for romantic escapism. Still, this connection is certainly not made as directly in Bennett's novels as it is in those written by Corelli. Nor does Bennett stigmatise this reading material and the girls' characters as Corelli certainly would.

³¹⁶ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 11.

³¹⁷ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 11. Hilda has to convince her mother to purchase a copy of the poem for her elsewhere because, as Bennett notes, there was no Turnhill Municipal Library, or public lending libraries there – or even any local booksellers – to enable her to do so herself. Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 12.

³¹⁸ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, pp. 196 and pp. 206.

The education of women, whether through schools or through reading, is too powerful a force to escape any measure of control in Corelli's novels. As has been argued, innocence and virtue are the pivotal characteristics of ideal womanhood that this bestselling author promotes. However, because her books often explore the corruption of women in a very dramatic fashion – these books often portraying the lives of decadent women – blame is apportioned for the corruption of these far from ideal women. Literature is often singled out as the main instigator of immorality. Frequently, the 'modern ethics' of Ibsen, the late-nineteenth-century Norwegian dramatist, and of the 'New Moralists', and the seemingly decadent New Women novels of the 1890s are credited with helping to create these female anomalies.³¹⁹

Lady Sibyl in *The Sorrows of Satan* is Marie Corelli's most sensational immoral woman. And true to Corelli's thesis, literature is largely to blame for her state. Lady Sibyl's sin is that she has acquired far too much sexual knowledge – Corelli's primary criticism of modern literature being that it is morally lax especially in relation to sexuality. The era's popular New Women novels are revealed as the source of her knowledge, and therefore of her corruption.³²⁰ As she explains to her husband, Geoffrey Tempest: 'Oh yes, indeed we know quite well what we are doing now when we marry, thanks to the 'new' fiction!'³²¹ The writers of New Women novels, frequently female, come under bitter attack as authors who write in order to 'degrade and shame their sex' – authors who are 'destitute of grammar as well as decency.'³²² Not content to place all the blame on these novels, Corelli continues – this time with the poet, Algernon Charles Swinburne. Swinburne, Lady Sibyl claims, made her corruption complete as he tended to do with most of the decadent women of her time. She voices her

³¹⁹ For example, see Marie Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, Methuen, London, 1912 [1896], p. 150; and Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan or The Strange Experience of One Geoffrey Tempest, Millionaire. A Romance*, Methuen, London, 1895, p. 205.

³²⁰ Lady Sibyl conveniently leaves a suicide note explaining that her downfall stemmed from reading a New Women novel over and over again until she began to understand all of its insinuations and until she also began to enjoy them. (Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 405.)

³²¹ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 306.

³²² Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, pp. 305-306.

conviction that ‘there are many women to whom his works have been deadlier than the deadliest poison, and far more soul-corrupting than any book of Zola’s or the most pernicious of modern French writers.’³²³

And again, as with Bennett’s novels, the idea of parental monitoring is raised, reaffirming the topicality of this issue at the turn of the twentieth century. Like Hilda and Sophia, Lady Sibyl escapes parental censorship. True to Corelli’s sensationalism, this is because her formerly decadent mother has been hideously deformed and stricken mute as punishment for *her* immorality. This state clearly renders her incapable of communicating the dangers of unguided reading to her daughter. Unlike Bennett’s works, however, Corelli makes sure to point out that the consequences of this absence are morally disastrous.

But, Corelli’s treatment of the possible effects of reading are neither simple nor straightforward. For, just as she loads the massive burden of blame for corrupting womankind on the shoulders of modern literature, so too does she place complete faith in the redeeming factor of writing, especially if it is writing that mirrors the form and content of her own novels. Lady Sibyl’s only hope for a moral reprieve arrives in the form of the angelic Mavis Clare’s novels. They save Lady Sibyl – but only temporarily. After indulging in their beautifully moral sentiments, this decadent aristocrat reverts to her old ways and her immoral literature. However, the real worth of good fiction is not permitted to be lost on Corelli’s readers – the value of Mavis Clare’s novels, both as truthful instruction and as peaceful entertainment, are confirmed by the fact that Lady Sibyl will actually buy copies of Mavis Clare’s fiction, whereas she will only borrow New Women books from the libraries.³²⁴

³²³ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 406.

³²⁴ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 139.

Some forms of formal education, including the new girls' schools and tertiary education, were perceived to be as much of a possible threat to the feminine ideal as was unguided reading. However, whereas young women could sometimes manage to defy parental censorship (if not that imposed by bodies outside the home such as publishers and libraries) and obtain copies of 'unsuitable' reading material, there was very little opportunity of obtaining an education that parental or governmental bodies did not endorse.

In the first place, far from challenging the existing feminine ideal, nineteenth-century developments in girls' secondary schooling were overwhelmingly aimed at better preparing female students to aspire to these notions.³²⁵ By the 1870s, Felicity Hunt argues, 'education was seen as the essential key for opening the door to productive and useful lives for middle-class girls.'³²⁶ In other words, as the public sphere was moving towards greater professionalism, so too was the private.³²⁷ Given the era's well-publicised 'surplus' of women,³²⁸ it was understandable that preparing a small number of women for employment was a significant motivating factor in the establishment of some of the newer schools and colleges. However, even the newly established schools, with their increasing emphasis on intellectual attainment, did not ignore the prior need for 'ladylike behaviour and feminine qualities.'³²⁹ Girls' schooling, including newly developed schooling, was aimed primarily at fostering 'pleasing, supportive individuals'.³³⁰ Schooling was often geared towards informing girls 'just enough so that they might ideally help their husbands and share their interests, but no more than this.'³³¹ So, despite some changes to structure and to curriculum content, middle-

³²⁵ For examples, see Burstyn, p. 20.

³²⁶ Hunt, 'Divided Aims', p. 4.

³²⁷ Rowbotham, p. 113.

³²⁸ For a discussion on 'surplus' women see W. R. Greg, 'Why are Women Redundant?', *The National Review*, April, 1862, pp. 434-460.

³²⁹ Hunt, 'Divided Aims', p. 6.

³³⁰ Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 44.

³³¹ Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 44. And as Rowbotham's investigation of didactic fiction for girls further illustrates, in order for 'sweet maids' to function properly within their own private domain, in order for them to fittingly perform their

class girls' learning remained largely faithful to the feminine ideals of social duty, service to others and self-sacrifice.³³²

Given the continuing strength of the feminine ideal and given that a vast majority of middle-class parents had little interest in cultivating scholarly activities in their daughters, it is hardly surprising that higher education for women was such a controversial issue. By the end of the Victorian era, an enormous chasm still existed between the accepted male and female spheres of action – a chasm that advances in women's education had certainly not managed to overcome. What, then, do the popular novels of Bennett and Corelli contribute to this discussion? These novels illustrate the existence of a myriad of turn-of-the-century views about gender idealisation. For the most part, they demonstrate the continuing existence of this gap between appropriate male and female realms of activity – both in terms of mindset and experience. These books, Corelli's much more so than Bennett's, even suggest that this gap was further reinforced during this period.³³³ Faced with perceived threats to such well-guarded ideals, various elements of society, particularly the more traditional or conservative elements, determined to defend separate spheres notions even more fiercely. Still, the references that Bennett and Corelli both make to the presence of threats to the validity of these notions at least strongly suggests that general attitudes regarding the place of women in turn-of-the-century society were not in any way static. They were under increasing pressure, even if they were still tightly guarded.

tasks, they first had to be informed of the duties and responsibilities expected of them. (Rowbotham, p. 99.)

³³² Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 26; and Hunt, 'Divided Aims', p. 7.

³³³ Kirsten Drotner agrees with the view that in some respects gender idealisation was reinforced during this period. In reference to periodicals for girls and boys over the last decades of the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century, for example, Drotner argues that, although class differences were bridged somewhat, gender differences persisted. Indeed, she contends that these gender differences 'can even be said to have been reinforced in the twentieth century.' (Kirsten Drotner, *English Children and their Magazines, 1751-1945*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1988, p. 239.)

Bennett's novel, *Hilda Lessways*, comments on the self-education of a young middle-class woman in the early years of the twentieth century. The attitude that he adopts towards this is not overly enthusiastic, but neither is it critical. Hilda's determination to undergo training for an occupation, then, is not portrayed as overly dangerous or threatening. And her womanhood is still very much assured after such an undertaking. Hilda, Bennett's 'new woman', decides to train as a clerical assistant. She enrolls in a shorthand course – the first woman in her town to do so. She uses that training to secure a job in the office of a local newspaper, under the direction of the man who becomes her husband, George Cannon. Significantly, Hilda undertakes this course of study only at Cannon's instigation. For, although the urge to do something different from the usual business of domesticity plagues her mind, only Cannon's involvement in and knowledge of the male-dominated world of business and of training manages to provide her with much needed direction.

Similarly, Bennett introduces this notion of a man's influence or of his inspiration as partial explanation of Hilda's decision to further educate herself in the history of printing. This time Hilda finds herself intrigued by the young Edwin Clayhanger, son of the owner of a printing works. It is revealing of the climate of opinion at the time as far as girls' learning was concerned that Edwin has to wonder if Hilda's decision to buy and read *Cranwick's New History of Printing* is a sign of her interest in him or whether it is really a sign of her interest in self-education – 'was she a prodigy among young women, who read histories of everything in addition to being passionate about verse?'³³⁴ True to the effort that he typically makes to depict a form of reality without seeming to take sides, Bennett leaves this query unanswered. Hilda's passionate interest in verse and in printing history is unusual, perhaps even threatening, given the protected and unworldly ideal of womanhood. But, Bennett implies that her interest in Edwin, and in the idea of making herself more knowledgeable as a conversationalist and a

companion, may well recommend her as a version of the very ‘modern’ turn-of-the-century feminine ideal.

Bennett’s approach to Rose Stanway (*Leonora*, 1903) tells a different story. Rose sits for the Matriculation of London University examinations – a move that renders her completely atypical of a vast majority of Bennett’s female characters. She is presented as the ‘serious’ member of the Stanway family.³³⁵ In many ways she conforms to the stereotypical image of the serious-minded girl-student of the later decades of the nineteenth century. Bennett’s depiction of Rose, then, helps to confirm the continued existence of this stereotype in popular consciousness, and therefore of the continued existence of a certain degree of bias, or at least general ignorance, about the idea of further education for women. However, the fact that she does not fully conform to the harsh stereotype promoted in the press, that she does have personal qualities to recommend her and that she is described without any sense of derision on the author’s part, also demonstrates that common attitudes towards girls furthering themselves with the aid of education were not completely hostile. Rose’s story illustrates that significant gaps existed between the traditionally secure world of Victorian femininity and the increasingly, if slowly, new space being created for women of the Late Victorian and Edwardian middle classes (spaces such as the newly established educational and employment institutions catering for women). It also shows that this breach was not as unbridgeable as the staunchly conservative opinion of the era would have us think.

In physical appearance and in physical health, Rose conforms to a common girl-student image. She is tall, pale and ‘a little dowdy’. She walks with a stoop – a recognisably stereotypical trait of the female student. And unlike her beautiful sister, Ethel, and her pretty younger sister, Millicent, Rose is plain.³³⁶ She also

³³⁴ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 273. This remark recalls the incident at the Orgreave house when Hilda made a passionate outburst defending the brilliance of Hugo’s *Notre Dame*. See Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 196; and Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 148.

³³⁵ Bennett, *Leonora. A Novel*, Books for Libraries Press, Plainview, New York, 1975 [1903], p. 18.

suffers from headaches that are directly attributable to overindulging in study.³³⁷ Initially, these headaches manage to prevent her from successfully completing her examinations.³³⁸ By inflicting Rose with study headaches, Bennett feeds into the widely held opinion that girls were not physically strong enough to endure long hours of study. Nervous stress, ‘brain fever’ and headaches, it was believed, were the result of too much mental exertion on the part of girls.³³⁹ By the beginning of the twentieth century, opposition to girls undergoing rigorous study and examination had shifted from the individual physical results of mental exertion to eugenic concerns about the quantity and quality of the race.³⁴⁰

Rose’s example also confirms that issues closely related to female study, such as these health concerns, were seen to be a source of family tension. Rose’s father, John Stanway, worries continually about the effects of study on his daughter’s health. Consequently, he makes numerous threats to curbs the hours in which she works. Moreover, Stanway’s concerns lead to arguments between himself and his wife, Leonora, who he believes, should be exerting much more influence and control over Rose’s deleterious habits. Moreover, Rose’s scholarly and vocational inclinations further alienate her from her siblings who do not share her interests.³⁴¹

Further alienating Rose from her family is her manner – her arrogance – again directly attributed to her course of study:

Utterly absorbed in the imminent examination, her brain a welter of sterile facts, Rose found all the seriousness of life in dates, irregular participles, algebraic symbols, chemistry

³³⁶ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 18.

³³⁷ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 61.

³³⁸ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 202.

³³⁹ Rowbotham, p. 118. Such opinion manifested itself, for instance, in Dr Henry Maudsley’s article ‘Sex in Mind and Education’, published in *Fortnightly Review* in 1874. Maudsley voiced the belief that menstruation incapacitated women’s bodies in a way that rendered them less capable of possessing the physical stamina needed for intense study. (Henry Maudsley, ‘Sex in Mind and Education’, *Fortnightly Review*, vol. 21, no. 15, 1874, pp. 466-483.)

³⁴⁰ See Perkin, p. 41. Perkin claims that these eugenic concerns were voiced by both male and female members of the medical profession.

³⁴¹ For example, Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 21, p. 33 and p. 170.

formulas, the altitudes of mountains and the areas of inland seas. To the cruelty of the too earnest enthusiast she added the cruelty of youth, and it was with a merciless injustice that she judged everyone with whom she came into opposition.³⁴²

What is significant about Rose's personality is the fact that her feelings of superiority do nothing to recommend her as a female character. They certainly do not recommend her as an ideal single young woman. At this point in her life Rose is uninterested in anything beyond her education – 'She despised style, and regarded her sisters as frivolous ninnies and gadabouts.'³⁴³ Her seriousness and her lack of interest in the outward trappings of conventional femininity appear to place Rose close to the era's de-sexed caricature of the girl-student, or more damning, to that of the New Women.

However, Bennett does not allow this to happen. Instead, he introduces a number of details that help to flesh out Rose's character. In the first place, he reduces the impact of the girl-student appearance by explaining that her stooped appearance is also shared by her father and her sister, and so is obviously not attributable simply to her bending over a study desk.³⁴⁴ And although she is the plainer of the three girls, she is not entirely unattractive. Indeed, in one instance, when the Stanway women are all awaiting the arrival of the charming Mr Twemlow, Leonora notes, with a pleasant sense of surprise, that Rose could be 'quite attractive' when she chose to be – when she was 'unbent'.³⁴⁵

Secondly, Rose does not conform to the *Saturday Review*'s harsh description of 'an over-accomplished woman' as 'one of the most intolerable monsters in

³⁴² Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 140.

³⁴³ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 18.

³⁴⁴ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 18.

³⁴⁵ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 186.

creation'.³⁴⁶ Rose's arrogance is partially excused because of her youth.³⁴⁷ And far from using her sense of self-assurance purely for her own ends, she is seen to employ it to protect others. For example, she is the only member of her family to challenge her father's actions – a man who, because of severe financial strain, was willing to attempt to smother his ailing uncle in his bed for an inheritance.³⁴⁸ Rose's faith in her own opinion and in the strength of her character serves her family well in this instance – at least all of her family excluding her father.

However closely related aspects of Rose's personality are to those of the New Woman, Bennett does not portray her as a model of the 'advanced' or feminist-minded woman. Rather, she is quite traditional and conservative.³⁴⁹ Further education does not automatically produce radical or feminist-minded women in Bennett's books. Nor do these women necessarily represent any form of threat to existing notions of womanhood.

What the example of Rose does reveal is the ever-widening gap existing between the old and new concept of acceptable space for women at the turn of the twentieth century. And this division is played out in the contrasting thoughts and experiences of Leonora and Rose. At the beginning of the novel Leonora expresses pity concerning Rose's peculiar ambitions – peculiar, that is, for a girl.³⁵⁰ By the novel's end, Leonora, in contrast to Rose, finds herself feeling completely displaced. She visits the New Female and Maternity Hospital in London where Rose is completing her medical training as an 'impassioned student

³⁴⁶ Perkin claims that, following educational changes during the 1860s and 1870s, such as the opening up of Cambridge University and Oxford University exams to women, the *Saturday Review* 'never ceased' to make this assertion. (See Perkin, p. 42.)

³⁴⁷ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 140.

³⁴⁸ For example, Rose questions her father - voices the words her mother fails to - when he tells Leonora to leave uncle Meshach and go and see how aunt Hannah is - purely because he is anxious about his supposed inheritance of their money. (Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 237.)

³⁴⁹ Bennett illustrates this by detailing a seemingly inconsequential incident that occurs at the end of a dance that the Stanway family attends – an incident that demonstrates the diverging traditional and modern inclinations of the various members of the family. Whereas Leonora, Ethel and Millicent stay downstairs to enjoy the modern forms of song and dance, John Stanway, Rose and a female member of the School Board remain upstairs singing the much more traditional 'Auld Lang Syne'. (Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 219.)

³⁵⁰ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 73.

of obstetrics' after finally passing her examinations.³⁵¹ The image that she is confronted with – of her dedicated, tired, over-worked daughter in this harsh, clinical, though acceptably female environment – contrasts with her recollections of the comfort and security of her own world. Such a contrast works to consolidate the notion that changes are occurring whether welcome or not.

Rose's decision to further her learning and take her place on the staff of one of London's new hospitals for women does not represent a rejection of all things female. Rather, it represents the embracing of an extension of nineteenth-century notions of femininity – albeit notions that have not achieved popularity or general acceptance by this period. Carol Dyhouse argues,

Given the fact that most women had deeply internalised the idea that femininity entailed self-sacrifice, that it was womanly to be modest, retiring and attentive to other's needs, it was not surprising that the majority of girls were either unambitious, and that those who *were* ambitious often felt embarrassed or guilty about being so. Victorian society was always likely to equate intellectual ambition in women with selfishness.³⁵²

Rose's lack of guilt is not solely due to her self-confidence. It is also attributable to the fact that her choice of occupation is legitimately womanly – reputed for its commitment to service and self-sacrifice. This justifies her learning. And again, given the moral climate at the turn of the century, her unsentimental and unapologetic pursuit of success in this realm is increasingly likely to have been viewed as a legitimate extension of womanly duty, rather than as a rejection of it.

Rose's story is only one example of higher learning – and there are few others in Bennett's popular novels. But this example is significant in its contribution to contemporary debate – in what it does reveal about young women and their

³⁵¹ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 333 and p. 337.

³⁵² Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 73.

education, especially when contrasted to the attitudes revealed in Corelli's highly escapist, bestselling fiction. One only has to look at the sentiments expressed in Corelli's books to find clear evidence of the continuing strength of hostility towards higher education for women. However, these widely popular books also show that the changing place of women in Victorian society was such a real and imminent issue that it was to be avoided, or at least the mundane details associated with this issue were to be avoided, in these highly escapist stories.

Corelli's sensational approach to fiction permits her to issue statements to the effect that higher education for women, and therefore increased learning or knowledge for women, equated with instilling atheism – religious dissent or disbelief being a topical issue at the turn of the twentieth century.³⁵³ In *The Mighty Atom*, for example, she refers to the undesirable presence of ugly, 'advanced', Girton-educated, atheistic women.³⁵⁴ But her highly escapist approach also exempts her from having to explain how her heroines actually received their education or how they had to deal with the very topical issue of middle-class female employment. For the most part, Corelli's female protagonists are from the Late Victorian and Edwardian upper-middle and upper classes. As such, they rarely have to confront the very real issues facing a number of other middle-class women, including some of those in Bennett's novels, like earning an income.

Both innocence and unworldliness are absolutely essential to Corelli's ideal of womanhood. Education or employment in the public realm then is forbidden because it threatens to expose women to the very knowledge from which Corelli seeks to protect them. A girl's learning should be dictated by a firm sense of morality – for being a good woman is much more important than being an accomplished or an ambitious one. This is not to say that Corelli's heroines are without ambition. On the contrary, these women often harbour dreams of

³⁵³ See chapter 6 'Religion and Spirituality' later in the thesis.

³⁵⁴ Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, p. 104.

producing great, or at least inspirational works of art and of literature, but there are guidelines in place to ensure that these aspirations remain firmly within the accepted sphere of female activity.

In the first place, and true to Corelli's brand of escapism, the women within her novels rarely suffer financial need. They are not normally forced to think of a suitable form of employment. Secondly, if any of her heroines are afflicted with such a need, such as the angelic Mavis Clare (*The Sorrows of Satan*), then chances are that they are blessed with the training and the talent to ensure that they enjoy success, both in terms of fame and fortune, within the appropriately feminine realm of the arts. Mavis Clare, for example, is a writer of genius. Even the impeccable Angela Sovrani (*The Master-Christian*), unencumbered as she is with financial need, is an enormously successful painter. And thirdly, if a female protagonist is keen to pursue learning of some sort, then it must be for the sake of improving her soul and for developing her skills as a companion and wife – not for the unwomanly purpose of gaining public recognition or even for the sole aim – one deemed selfish – of achieving a sense of self-achievement. The female narrator of *The Life Everlasting* is exemplary in this respect. Not only does she spend her days researching psychic law, but she also volunteers to put herself through a gruelling ordeal at the hands of an unusual monastic order so that she can lift herself to the high spiritual level attained by her soul-mate, Rafel Santoris.³⁵⁵

Conveniently, the vocational skills attained by Corelli's heroines are almost intuitional, rather than the product of education and training. Whether artistic or literary, their techniques are superb. But, more importantly, the content of their writing and painting is morally impeccable – upholding the feminine ideal. Corelli's fiction, then, further reveals the extent to which gaps or even

³⁵⁵ In seeking admittance to the Château d'Aselzion, she pleads: 'do not turn me away without teaching me something of your peace and power - the peace and power which Rafel possesses, and which I too must possess if I would help him and be all in all to him'. (Marie Corelli, *The Life Everlasting. A Reality of Romance*, Methuen, London, 1911, p. 311.)

contradictions existed between the concept of education for the purpose of gaining employment and that for instilling feminine ideals. Her writing reconciles these by accepting aspects of worldly ambition that she deems femininely desirable, including the intention of promoting good in the world, while at the same time rejecting those less appropriate or less suitable traits, such as individual recognition that feminine idealists considered selfish.



Late Victorian and Edwardian society witnessed numerous changes concerning the structure of girls' education. Elementary, secondary and tertiary institutions were either newly established or recently opened to more women. However, these developments affected only a small proportion of the middle classes. Still, that they existed at all demonstrates that mentality shifts regarding women and education were in motion.

Bennett's and Corelli's novels support this view that turn-of-the-century attitudes towards female education were in various ways in transition. Bennett, for example, shows that one of his more educationally advanced female characters, Rose Stanway (*Leonora*), is not as much of a threat to society's well-guarded feminine ideals as many of the period's more conservative elements would have people believe. Moreover, although Corelli bitterly attacks the stereotypical image of the Girton woman, her novels do incorporate some of the more perceptible attitude shifts concerning women and their career ambitions. Middle-class women in her novels may not place a career above other important female duties, such as being a lover and a wife, but they are allowed to exercise their intellect in a public setting, for example, in the form of books and paintings.

However, similar to turn-of-the-century society, Corelli's novels demand adherence to certain rules. The most important of these is that the teaching of morality and the instilling of feminine and domestic ideals must be foremost, if not

uppermost, among the objectives of female learning, whatever form it assumes. Indeed, because Corelli recognises that turn-of-the-century society was faced with an as yet small, but growing number of challenges to the whole notion of separate spheres, her books make a determined effort, not simply to protect existing ideals, but to further reinforce them. Her fiction defends with tremendous zeal feminine idealisation and the whole idea of separate but equal spheres.

Still, the very existence of these threats or challenges, as shown by Bennett's portrayal of the ambitious Rose Stanway and Hilda Lessways, and as indicated by Corelli's zealous defence of gender idealisation, does at least demonstrate that attitudes towards middle-class women and their learning were not static. Such notions were under increasing pressure, even if middle-class women were still overwhelmingly expected to prepare for their future positions as wives and mothers and as housekeepers – a role that the following chapter explores in detail.

Chapter 4

The Business of Domesticity

There are plenty of myths surrounding the middle-class woman of the Victorian and Edwardian years. For the most part, these myths draw on the notion that this female figure lived an 'idle' or 'redundant' life – that she was a 'lady of leisure'. Yet, by the end of the nineteenth century, only those women from the upper classes and the upper levels of the middle classes could be said to conform to any conception of an idle or leisurely lady. The upper middle classes, especially, benefited from the vast amount of wealth to be found in the nation's growing number of financial and commercial enterprises.³⁵⁶ As a result of this, and of their aspirations to emulate the lifestyles of the gentry with whom they increasingly came to have close contact, families from this social stratum invested substantially in domestic service.³⁵⁷ Along with decreasing family sizes, the increasing availability of domestic appliances and pre-packaged goods and the reduced amount of time that children tended to spend away from schooling, this acted to free the women of these households from much involvement in domestic chores and enabled them to play a more prominent role performing the social and philanthropic duties fitting a woman of the privileged classes.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁶ The upper middle class still consisted of manufacturers, especially from the industrial North and Midlands, but economic changes in the later decades of the nineteenth century saw the increased participation in this social stratum of rising members of the professions, including doctors, lawyers and highly positioned members of the Civil Service, and the increasingly wealthy, and therefore increasingly prominent, city merchants and bankers. (See J. F. C. Harrison, *Late Victorian Britain, 1875-1901*, Fontana Press, London, 1990, pp. 50-58; Jose Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914*, Penguin, London, 1994, p. 108; H. C. G. Matthew and Kenneth O. Morgan, *The Modern Age*, in Kenneth O. Morgan (ed.), *The Oxford History of Britain*, vol. 5, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1992, p. 27; and François Bédarida, *A Social History of England, 1851-1990*, translated by A. S. Forster and Geoffrey Hodgkinson, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 149-152.

³⁵⁷ Harrison, p. 19 and pp. 50-58.

³⁵⁸ Matthew, for example, writes of upper middle-class women: 'Women, thus partially liberated, played an important role in charities, churches, local politics, and the arts, especially music'. (Matthew, p. 29.) For information on falling birth rates, see Harrison, p. 13 and Harris, p. 62. Harris also argues, in reference to the middle classes during this era, that 'tens of thousands of boys, and to a lesser extent girls, were at any one time incarcerated in boarding-schools' – a factor, for example, that, when viewed alongside falling birth rates, rising incomes, easily available domestic service and better medical services, meant that 'an intelligent middle-class mother was

However, the bulk of middle-class women, those from the lower levels of this wide and varied social group, who could generally only afford the help of one paid servant, did not escape active involvement in housework.³⁵⁹ A vast number of the Late Victorian and Edwardian middle-class women, therefore, immersed themselves in what Arnold Bennett's New Woman character, Hilda Lessways, calls 'the business of domesticity'.³⁶⁰ Some accepted this without question, some embraced it, others tolerated it, only a few rejected it or made a visible attempt to do so. Alternative life paths were rare. Few middle-class women were encouraged to pursue a career outside the home, and only a relatively small minority did so. This situation was not helped by the fact that employment opportunities for middle-class women in the male-dominated public domain were few, although they were on the increase, noticeably in the decades immediately before and after the turn of the century. Women of this social stratum, then, were overwhelmingly brought up to expect a life centred around, even bound within the home – performing household tasks, preferably as a wife and mother, but failing that, as a dutiful daughter, sister or aunt.

Following from this, many of the popular novels of the time serve to debunk the basic premise of these myths of leisurely or idle women – although they do so in very different ways. For example, whereas Arnold Bennett's middlebrow novels tend towards detailing the material conditions affecting a woman's work, thereby drawing attention to the multitude of often laborious household chores that she was expected to carry out, Marie Corelli's bestselling fiction tends towards escapist depictions of women divorced from their daily responsibilities. However, the numerous attacks in Corelli's novels on the unseemly drudgery involved in the performance of lowly and mundane household chores, at least as this applies to

able both to excel at and to enjoy motherhood probably to a greater extent than at any previous time in human history'. (Harris, p. 82.)

³⁵⁹ Harris notes that there were many complaints during the 1900s that middle-class women were increasingly delegating the bulk of domestic tasks to servants. She adds, however, that it is very likely that these complaints were exaggerated on the grounds that few middle-class homes could afford 'a wholly idle wife'. (Harris, p. 71. See also, Harrison, p. 58.)

women from the middle and upper rungs of turn-of-the-century society, draws attention to the reading public's interest in Victorian ideals concerning the place of women in the domestic sphere and her occasional challenging of the validity of these ideals alludes to the often opposing or contradictory reality of these women's lives.

Much of the history writing published on this subject over the past few decades also firmly challenges the notion of the idle middle-class woman. For the purposes of brevity and of simplicity, the bulk of these secondary sources can be divided into two main groups. On the one hand, there are those investigations into the Victorian and Edwardian woman's role in the home and in society that test whether or not the conditions governing her actual existence conformed to those connected with the prominent stereotypes to have come out of the era. These sources refer to middle-class women's interior lives, but few of them aim to present any substantial insights into these women's thoughts and feelings about their expected and their actual roles in the home and further in society itself. Included among these studies are those written by historians Leonore Davidoff, Patricia Branca and Carol Dyhouse.³⁶¹ The second group of historians referred to in this chapter concentrate more on detailing the material conditions within the home and the technological changes affecting the domestic environment. Included among these are articles and books written by Christina Hardyment, Caroline Davidson, Ruth Schwartz Cowan and Theresa McBride.³⁶² Both these categories

³⁶⁰ Arnold Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976 [1911], p. 10.

³⁶¹ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between. Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995; Patricia Branca, 'Image and Reality: The Myth of the Idle Victorian Woman', in Mary Hartman and Lois W. Banner (eds.), *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women*, Harper Torchbook, 1974, pp. 179-191; Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, Boston and Henley, 1981; and Carol Dyhouse, 'Mothers and Daughters in the Middle-Class Home', in Jane Lewis (ed.), *Labour and Love. Women's Experience of Home and Family, 1850-1940*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, pp. 27-47.

³⁶² Christina Hardyment, *From Mangle to Microwave. The Mechanization of Household Work*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990; Caroline Davidson, *A Woman's Work is Never Done. A History of Housework in the British Isles 1650-1950*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1986; Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother. The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*, Basic Books, New York, 1983; and Theresa McBride, *The Domestic Revolution*.

of historical research contribute towards building up a picture of middle-class Victorian and Edwardian women's daily lives for late twentieth- and early twenty-first century observers. However, what is very often absent from the historical record are deeper penetrations of the housewife's inner life – including, with respect to the principal subjects of this thesis, the unmarried housekeeper's interior life – especially regarding the more mundane, often time-consuming tasks that make up the bulk of her daily life.

Again, this is where popular novels of the era prove so useful a source, even an indispensable one. As has been said, the vast majority of middle-class women in Victorian and Edwardian society accepted their responsibilities within the home. In fact, on this issue, they were the 'silent majority'. As Carol Dyhouse argues,

It is often easier for the historian to find out about the attitudes and experiences of those women who rejected their role than about those who accepted these expectations and shaped their lives accordingly. The latter group were less likely to leave autobiographies or other written records, or to inspire biographers.³⁶³

Fiction, especially popular middlebrow novels that manage to penetrate the individual character's consciousness, can help to fill in the 'gaps' existing regarding this private, often inaccessible aspect of everyday life.

From an early age girls were trained for what was regarded as their primary role, within the home.³⁶⁴ As the previous chapter on learning has demonstrated, their education consisted typically of domestic occupations, such as sewing and cooking, interspersed with other useful subjects including mathematics and English - all which contributed towards the middle-class woman's competence in

The Modernisation of Household Service in England and France 1820-1920, Croom Helm, London, 1976.

³⁶³ Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Victorian England*, p. 31.

³⁶⁴ As Dyhouse points out, home education, most boarding schools and smaller girls' academies had similar aims of nurturing femininity and of instilling the ideal of the 'cultivated homemaker' in students' minds. (Dyhouse, 'Mothers and Daughters', p. 37.)

performing her role as housekeeper (whether as cleaner, seamstress, cook, account-keeper or even as social hostess).³⁶⁵ In modest middle-class homes, girls were certainly expected to contribute to keeping the house clean and in order; whereas boys were not. As Dyhouse points out, a middle-class boy's free time was – in contrast to a girl's – likely to be considered his own.³⁶⁶ Men were trained for employment within the wider public sphere and women were brought up to anticipate a future situated within the secure confines of the home – a confinement that protected women from contamination from the public sphere but which also secured male comfort within the home.³⁶⁷

As a result, a dichotomy was established between popular perceptions of typical male and female labour. It was commonly considered, for instance, that men 'worked', whereas women 'stayed at home'.³⁶⁸ As the nineteenth century progressed, and as general income levels rose, middle-class housewives increasingly employed domestic servants to help carry out their duties, but such daily tasks were still not generally regarded as 'work'.³⁶⁹ Not surprisingly, from this basis, as well as from the fact that family sizes had decreased and from the growing availability of time-saving domestic appliances and pre-packaged goods, myths surrounding the 'idle' or 'leisured' nature of the middle-class housewife increased in volume.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁵ See also Felicity Hunt for more detailed discussion of tension surrounding the domestic content of a girl's education and the inclusion of the curriculum that prepared her for a life outside the home. (Felicity Hunt, 'Divided Aims: The Educational Implications of Opposing Ideologies in Girls' Secondary Schooling, 1850-1940', in Felicity Hunt (ed.), *Lessons for Life. The Schooling of Girls and Women, 1850-1950*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford and New York, 1987, pp. 3-21.)

³⁶⁶ Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, p. 11. Draznin comments that it was part of a daughter's sense of filial duty to perform unpaid domestic work for her parents. (Yaffa Claire Draznin, *Victorian London's Middle-Class Housewife. What She Did All Day*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut and London, 2001, p. 8.)

³⁶⁷ For example, see Dyhouse, 'Mothers and Daughters', p. 28.

³⁶⁸ Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, p. 26.

³⁶⁹ Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, p. 26. Working in the home was not classified as employment, for example, in the 1881 and 1891 census women performing these duties were labelled 'unoccupied' – only domestic service is listed. (Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p. 89.)

³⁷⁰ For a more detailed description of these myths, see Branca, 'Image and Reality', especially pp. 179-180.

However, a large proportion of middle-class wives were still confronted with the stark contradictions inherent within a society that promoted the ideal of the leisured lady in the face of the everyday reality of constant and heavy unclean household duties.³⁷¹ Late twentieth century historians, including among others Pat Thane and Patricia Branca, strenuously refute any notion that the typical middle-class woman lived a life of leisure.³⁷² Thane argues that the stereotype of the 'functionless angel in the house', if it is derived from anything other than satire, is at most based on a very 'narrow stratum of upper and upper-middle class'. And she adds: 'Even at this level the management of a complex household, amid the dirt and pollution of a late Victorian town or city, with minimal assistance from domestic technology, was no trivial task.'³⁷³ Moreover, she notes that only the top 10 percent of the middle class lived at the level of a very comfortably well off household. Below this level, 'females at home worked as hard as women and men outside the home, though how hard, in what environment and with what assistance varied with income level and the stage of the family life cycle.'³⁷⁴

Patricia Branca reinforces this view:

Reality for most middle-class women was that they spent all their days and many evening in scrubbing, dusting, tending fires, for six to ten rooms in a three-to-four story home, in addition to the cooking, shopping, washing and sewing required for a family of seven. While the middle-class woman had assistance in her work, it did not save her from hard physical labour.³⁷⁵

³⁷¹ See Dyhouse, 'Mothers and Daughters', p. 28.

³⁷² See, for example, Branca's article, 'Image and Reality'; Pat Thane, 'Late Victorian Women', in T. R. Gourvish and Alan O'Day (eds.), *Later Victorian Britain, 1867-1900*, Macmillan, Houndsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London, 1988, pp. 175-208, pp. 189-190; and Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1995, p. 14.

³⁷³ Thane, p. 189.

³⁷⁴ Thane, pp. 189-190.

³⁷⁵ Branca, 'Image and Reality', p. 185.

Thus, both Branca and Thane firmly challenge the notion that the typical housewife was either helpless, dependant or inactive – pointing out that her role within the home and the family, and also within society, required a level of commitment and of responsibility from her that ideals and myths ignore. The middle-class woman played ‘a vital and active role’ in the Victorian family.³⁷⁶ Not only did she assume full responsibility for the efficient running of often complex households, incorporating a multitude of heavy, time-consuming chores, but she also assumed a position of authority over the servant or servants. Furthermore, women were expected to assume responsibility for managing the financial aspects of what Jeanne Peterson terms ‘the mundane household matters that were a standard part of middle-class women’s lives.’³⁷⁷ Draznin remarks the women often entered into the position of housewife without any previous experience in financial management.³⁷⁸ However, Peterson argues, at least in reference to the upper-middle-class women of the Paget family, that single women were certainly expected to manage their own financial affairs.³⁷⁹ Doubtless middle-class and lower-middle-class women, without any or much of an independent income, had less experience dealing with financial responsibility than their wealthier counterparts. Still, as Arnold Bennett’s novels show, there were those daughters from middle-class homes who managed the housekeeping, including the housekeeping money, before marriage. Anna Tellwright (*Anna of the Five Towns*) is one such example. Anna has no say in how much money her father allots to housekeeping, but she is given responsibility for dispensing the funds. And although Anna is extremely uncomfortable handling large amounts of money (such as the money she earns from business transactions conducted in her name but primarily managed by her father – responsibility for which she hands over to her husband, Mynors, immediately after their marriage), there is never any

³⁷⁶ Branca, ‘Image and Reality’, p. 189.

³⁷⁷ M. Jeanne Peterson, *Family, Love and Work in the Lives of Victorian Gentlewomen*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1989, p. 124.

³⁷⁸ Draznin, p. 81.

³⁷⁹ Peterson, p. 123.

indication that she is incapable of bearing the financial responsibilities of housekeeping.³⁸⁰

Managing household budgets and keeping record of all relevant accounts was an important aspect of the housewife's or housekeeper's job. As Thane argues, her role as 'chancellor of the domestic exchequer', extracting maximum value from sometimes inadequate or at least ungenerous household funds, was a 'vital determinant of its [household's] standard of living and of its outward respectability and status'.³⁸¹ Moreover, this stress on the housewives' financial responsibilities is seen to have increased as the nineteenth century drew to a close. Teresa McBride agrees that keeping household accounts was not in any way uncommon. But what she does consider to be remarkable 'is the even broader concern for orderliness and accountability; mistresses, for example, were urged to keep careful inventories of provisions, of linens, of china'.³⁸² McBride explains this increasing emphasis as part of a general middle-class character which harboured an almost obsessive concern with possessions. But she also argues that it forms part of a general late-nineteenth concern with orderliness and efficiency in housekeeping.³⁸³ McBride's study bases a considerable portion of its research on advice manuals, such as the renowned Mrs Beeton's. Yet, despite persistently strong demand for Mrs Beeton's counsel, it is still questionable whether or not her instructions were actually incorporated into everyday domestic activities. However, what is certain, is that a large proportion of middle-class housewives or housekeepers were expected to manage domestic money matters – that far from being completely ignorant about and isolated from all financial concerns, women experienced an

³⁸⁰ Arnold Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, Wordsworth Classics, Hertfordshire, 1994 [1902]. For examples of Anna feeling out of place when large amounts of money are being discussed, see p. 27, p. 54 and p. 76; and for signs of the relief she feels when she hands her cheque books to her father and then, later in the novel, when she tells Henry Mynors that she wants him to take care of her money when they are married, see p. 33 and p. 170.

³⁸¹ Thane, p. 195. Davidoff supports the contention that often housewives were under constant pressure to maintain a desired standard of living while battling inadequate funds – a situation that is obviously accentuated in times of economic crisis or of war, when shopping for the cheapest products and avoiding waste is of the utmost importance. (Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p. 91.)

³⁸² McBride, p. 29.

³⁸³ McBride, p. 29.

important degree of financial responsibility including financial decision-making – as yet another aspect of their domestic duties.³⁸⁴

Domesticity, then, did not mean freedom from financial concerns. Middle-class women did not often lead leisurely or carefree lives. In fact, as Branca notes, ‘women were in the midst of the changes associated with modernization, for they managed resources above the subsistence level while lacking the funds to escape into a leisured existence.’³⁸⁵ Although society did not view domestic involvement as a form of employment and although they did not treat it as such, Thane further argues that women fulfilling criteria of this occupation thought differently. ‘Housewifery was a *job* and very many women saw it as such.’³⁸⁶

Housewifery is a term that reappears in history writing on domesticity. This thesis centres on unmarried women, not wives. Therefore, although housewifery is referred to, much of what is said (apart from details concerning bringing up children) can often be applied to daughters, sisters and nieces who work within the home of their closest male relative – performing tasks very similar to those undertaken by housewives. This is not to argue that these positions were identical or that they afforded equal rewards. Doubtless there were significant differences – differences, for example, that help to explain why the dutiful daughter, Anna Tellwright, in Arnold Bennett’s *Anna of the Five Towns*, looks forward to a relative degree of freedom and perhaps a greater degree of power or at least influence in her husband’s home than that afforded to her present position in her miserly father’s house.³⁸⁷ Still, there are also numerous similarities in the duties expected and degree of responsibility involved in the lives of each married and

³⁸⁴ However, Davidoff, in reference to the bigger picture, argues that women tended to be ‘woefully ignorant about family finances in general and their own families in particular’ – a factor that makes it notoriously difficult for historians to ‘reconstruct the distribution of income within the family’. She puts this ignorance down to the notion that it was considered inappropriate to ‘apply cash reckoning to family life’ rather than to the husband’s ‘meanness about disclosing his total income’. (Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p. 90.)

³⁸⁵ Branca, ‘Image and Reality’, p. 189.

³⁸⁶ Thane, p. 195.

³⁸⁷ Anna thinks of her marriage to Mynors as ‘her freedom’. (Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 129.)

unmarried housekeeper. That Bennett makes frequent reference to the attitudes of single middle-class women towards the business of domesticity further helps to fill in ‘gaps’ or ‘silences’ in the conventional historical record regarding unmarried Victorian and Edwardian women.

Moreover, this chapter also makes numerous references to the role of landladies or managers of boarding houses, namely Hilda Lessways and Sarah Gailey in Arnold Bennett’s *Hilda Lessways* and Sophia Baines in *The Old Wives’ Tale*. These unmarried women are included within this study because their positions were generally viewed as a legitimate extension of the woman’s primary role as housekeeper – especially with regard to middle-class women in financial straits or with little other means of support. As Leonora Davidoff in her article, ‘The Separation of Home and Work? Landladies and Lodgers in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century England’, argues, this role did not represent a challenge towards idealistic notions.³⁸⁸ For example, in addition to the convenience and the respectability of being able to earn an income within the home, or at least a home environment, this occupation did not require women to possess any unusual degrees of authority in that they were only expected to have power over servants and children – ‘both categories falling within a legitimate feminine domain.’³⁸⁹ Davidoff concludes with the reminder that this example shows that ‘there is no natural or fixed separation between a private and a public sphere’ – a reminder that indubitably validates including remarks made about the feelings of women involved in the running of such establishments.³⁹⁰

Given this, this thesis then adopts Leonore Davidoff’s general understanding of housework as activities that are ‘concerned with creating and maintaining order in the immediate environment, making meaningful patterns of activities, people and

³⁸⁸ Leonore Davidoff, ‘The Separation of Home and Work? Landladies and Lodgers in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century England’, in Sandra Burman (ed.), *Fit Work For Women*, Croom Helm, London, 1979, pp. 64-97. See, for example, p. 85.

³⁸⁹ Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p. 171.

³⁹⁰ Davidoff, ‘The Separation of Home and Work’, p. 93.

materials.’³⁹¹ And a historical study of this subject is legitimised by Davidoff’s additional assertion that, although ‘the activities may be timeless, the context and meaning are not.’³⁹²

Before discussing the material conditions affecting the housekeeper’s job, it is important to very briefly outline typical nineteenth century views towards women and domesticity. As has already been implied, the domestic sphere was overwhelmingly subject to idealistic notions concerning purity and femininity. The mid-Victorian ‘angel in the house’ was widely recognised as an unrealistic or unworkable ideal, but this does not mean that it did not yield influence over popular conceptions of a woman’s primary responsibilities, especially as they concerned the home and the family. Throughout the nineteenth century, for example, femininity was increasingly linked to purity; cleanliness was therefore increasingly tied to femininity; and, on a slightly different though related level, cleanliness was often viewed in connection with social class.³⁹³ Davidoff contends that women were considered closer to nature than men, perhaps because they were involved with physiological, and indeed spiritual, processes for a longer period of time than men (for example, menstruation, childbirth, lactation). Furthermore, they brought children into the world and were expected to care for them. For all of these reasons they were assigned the role of protector against moral and physical disorder.³⁹⁴ Tidiness, it follows, ‘was seen to be as much a moral as a physical attribute (A Place for Everything and Everything in its Place).’³⁹⁵ Being seen as purer than men, women were expected to also be cleaner. It then fell to women, that is those from the middle-and upper-class homes, to create clean and tidy havens amid public squalor and disorder.³⁹⁶ The ultimate nineteenth-century ideal, then, became, in Davidoff’s words,

³⁹¹ Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p. 75.

³⁹² Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, pp. 74-75.

³⁹³ On the other hand, for example, the nineteenth century poor and the labouring classes were frequently labelled ‘The Great Unwashed’. (See Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, pp. 76-80.)

³⁹⁴ Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, pp. 76-77.

³⁹⁵ Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p. 79.

³⁹⁶ Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, pp. 79-80.

the creation of a perfectly orderly setting of punctually served and elaborate meals, clean and tidy warmed rooms, clean, pressed and aired clothes and bedlinen. Children were to be kept in nurseries with nursemaids; animals and gardens cared for by outdoor servants; callers and strangers dealt with by indoor servants. In other words there was to be a complete absence of all disturbing or threatening interruptions to orderly existence which could be caused either by the intractability, and ultimate disintegration, of things or by the emotional disturbance of people.³⁹⁷

Very simply, and without even considering the impact that different personalities had on the carrying out of housework, creating such an ideal was extremely difficult in actuality given the nature of the nineteenth century homes, furnishings and domestic technology. Middle-class homes were frequently three-to-four storeys, often with dark basement kitchens.³⁹⁸ Fixtures, furnishings and even nineteenth century clothing were often of elaborate design rendering effective dusting and cleaning extremely difficult.³⁹⁹ A widespread lack of running water, and later of electricity or gas supply, and the relative absence of modern labour-saving devices such as vacuum cleaners, laundry equipment and ready-made clothing and foodstuffs until the end of the nineteenth century and, more often, until the early decades of the twentieth century, made housekeeping a particularly arduous and time-consuming duty.⁴⁰⁰ Factors making the middle-class woman's daily life more bearable included increasing affordability of domestic servants and increasing, though not by not any means widespread, technological innovations.

³⁹⁷ Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p. 81.

³⁹⁸ Branca, 'Image and Reality', p. 185.

³⁹⁹ Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p. 79 and Hardyment, p. 13.

⁴⁰⁰ For example, see the works of Hardyment, Cowan and Draznin. These writers all plot changes in general attitudes towards domesticity in England and the USA in the Victorian era (as well as over the past few hundred years) by examining advances in domestic technology and changing approaches to housework.

A large majority of Victorian and Edwardian middle-class homes hired only one general servant or maid-of-all-work.⁴⁰¹ Indeed, Teresa McBride adds that not every family which can be classified as middle-class (by occupation and by income) employed a servant.⁴⁰² And in addition to the prominent argument that hiring a servant served the purpose of ensuring the perceived gentility of the family in question⁴⁰³, Patricia Branca contends that rather than representing status, 'the servant was essential to the middle-class woman if she was to meet the physical burdens of maintaining the household.'⁴⁰⁴

But one servant, Branca argues, certainly did not render a middle-class woman's life a time of leisure.⁴⁰⁵ The general servant provided much needed help in such a labour-intensive environment – but she did not come without problems of her own. The 'servant problem' is one that numerous housekeeping manuals and advice columns refer to – that is to say, middle-class women employing help for the first time often encountered difficulties in knowing how to approach the new employer-employee situation and in attempting to train new help. The closeness or intimacy with which the relationship between the wife and middle-class house and domestic servant was conducted created difficulties for both parties (in comparison, that is, with women of the upper-middle and upper classes who were distanced from the general servant having a paid housekeeper mediating between the two).⁴⁰⁶ Furthermore, having a servant did not exempt middle-class women from obtaining the skills required for completing household chores. For, as McBride points out, in order to train servants, middle-class women had to have 'at least as much knowledge of domestic skills as would be necessary if she had to perform all of the household chores herself.'⁴⁰⁷ And household chores allotted to

⁴⁰¹ Branca, 'Image and Reality', p. 186. In reference to the years 1870-1914, Dyhouse estimates that three-quarters of middle-class homes had one domestic servant. (Dyhouse, 'Mothers and Daughters', p.28.)

⁴⁰² McBride, p. 20.

⁴⁰³ McBride, p. 18.

⁴⁰⁴ Branca, 'Image and Reality', p. 186.

⁴⁰⁵ Branca, 'Image and Reality', p. 187.

⁴⁰⁶ Branca, 'Image and Reality', p. 188. See also McBride, pp. 19 and 27.

⁴⁰⁷ McBride, p. 28.

the middle-class housewife at the turn of the twentieth century incorporated cooking, extensive cleaning and polishing, laundry duties, making and mending clothing, or finding the money to pay dressmakers, preparing menus and taking care of household accounts and budgeting. All of which required a great deal of decision-making and hard work and carried with it a significant degree of responsibility.

Not only were common cooking practices during this period labour-intensive, but eating habits, especially of the wealthy, were extravagant.⁴⁰⁸ Washing clothing and linen was extremely exhausting work, meaning that anyone who could afford to hire someone to carry out this task was very likely to do so. Furthermore, the era's style of fashionable clothing required delicate lace and ribbons to be removed before washing and reattached afterwards rendering the whole washing process even more time-consuming.⁴⁰⁹ Mending clothing was another expected task – with many female members of middle-class households spending much of their free time with a needle in hand. As Hardyment observes: 'No drawing-room was complete without its sewing-box or table, and servants too were expected to sew in any quiet hour of the day.'⁴¹⁰ As has been noted, furnishings and fittings tended to be elaborately made, and, as with stylish clothing, this made cleaning and polishing more difficult.⁴¹¹ Acres of mahogany to be polished; intricate glass chandeliers; brass and copper lamps; heavy velvet curtains and upholstery; coal fires (requiring constant emptying and relighting); rooms packed with ornaments – all increased the volume and the heaviness of the housewife and domestic servant's tasks.⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁸ Hardyment, p. 6. For example, Bennett refers to the extravagant table settings and rich food in the wealthy Sutton home. On one occasion, through Anna's eyes, he describes an 'elaborate meal, complex with fifty dainties each of which had to be savoured'. (See, Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, pp. 69-70.)

⁴⁰⁹ Hardyment, pp. 10-12.

⁴¹⁰ Hardyment, p. 12.

⁴¹¹ Hardyment, p. 13 and Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p. 79.

⁴¹² See Hardyment, p. 14. See also Draznin, chapter 5, for detailed descriptions of household chores and of the difficulties inherent in cleaning a Victorian home without the aid of labour-saving appliances.

While technological developments did enter into middle-class homes with increasing frequency (as has been noted), these did not really appear in force until the early decades of the twentieth century. Specifically referring to middle-class homes in London, Draznin reports that, by 1900, ‘gas outlets for lighting and appliances were in most rooms of the house.’⁴¹³ Baths were also to be found in separate bathrooms. Lighter furnishings and lighter coloured drapery and wallpaper had also largely replaced heavy crimson curtains and upholstery. Of all the rooms in the home, the kitchen changed the most. It was here, Draznin writes, that advances in domestic technologies were clearly evident. Instead of the old coal range, there was often a gas appliance. Electricity remained more expensive than gas so its use in moderate-income homes was unusual. But, even by the turn of the twentieth century, electrical appliances, like the vacuum cleaner, an easy-to-use clothes-washing machine, and domestic refrigerators were not yet on the market.⁴¹⁴ Some gas space heaters were being moved into more modern homes to replace coal fires. By the end of the nineteenth century, flush toilets in separate rooms were quite common in the middle-class home. Shopping for ready-made food was also quite usual, decreasing the time and effort spent preparing meals. By the 1890s, ready-made clothing was also available in great variety, cutting down the time sewing family clothing.⁴¹⁵ Moreover, Caroline Davidson adds to all this, that the single most important innovation affecting the carrying out of household duties was the spread of the piped water supplies to individual homes – largely a turn of the twentieth century development. The spread of gas and electricity supplies, Davidson argues, are better known than that of piped water, but are surely less significant.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹³ Draznin, p. 181.

⁴¹⁴ Draznin, p. 183.

⁴¹⁵ See Draznin, chapter 17, pp. 179-190.

⁴¹⁶ Davidson, p. 3. Bennett’s descriptions of water supplies in Arnold Bennett, *Clayhanger*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1975 [1910], pp. 173-174; and Arnold Bennett, *The Card. A Story of Adventure in the Five Towns*, Methuen, London, 1964 [1911], p. 187, (discussed later in the chapter) show support for Davidson’s contention.

All of these improvements indubitably benefited the housewife or housekeeper and the domestic servant.⁴¹⁷ But they did not remove the need for full-time housekeepers. As Ruth Schwartz Cowan argues, in relation to turn of the century USA but certainly relevant to the situation in England: ‘Modern labour-saving devices eliminated drudgery, but not labour.’⁴¹⁸ Cowan points out, for example, that time saved from having to preserve food and stitch petticoats was instead spent on other tasks including travelling to stores, shopping and standing in queues.⁴¹⁹ Furthermore, as Cowan, Thane and Hardyment all argue, indoor plumbing and the introduction of labour-saving appliances acted to raise expected standards of cleanliness – which in turn increased levels of productivity.⁴²⁰ ‘Women have always been responsible for keeping their families and their homes clean; with modern water (and other utility) systems, they become responsible for keeping them even cleaner.’⁴²¹ Indoor plumbing, for example, created bathrooms and bathrooms had to be cleaned. And this was no light or casual chore, especially given ‘the seriousness of the diseases that might result from unsanitary conditions.’⁴²² The bathroom, Cowan continues, ‘was not then just one more room to be cleaned, but a room that had to be thoroughly and frequently cleaned if the health of the family was to [be] maintained’.⁴²³ The nature of housework changed over the years, but the goal of keeping cleanliness and order was still there – so too, then, was the need for time-consuming labour.⁴²⁴

Naturally, not all women experienced their role within the domestic sphere in the same way – not all women felt the same about their primary responsibilities in life. As Caroline Davidson briefly argues:

⁴¹⁷ For example, see Draznin, p. 189.

⁴¹⁸ Cowan, pp. 100-101.

⁴¹⁹ Cowan, p. 85.

⁴²⁰ Cowan, pp. 88-89; Thane, p. 189; and Hardyment, p. 187.

⁴²¹ Cowan, pp. 88-89.

⁴²² Cowan, pp. 88-89.

⁴²³ Cowan, pp. 89-90. Hardyment also argues, for example, that a vacuum cleaner means that one does not have to live with dust and that, therefore, cleaning can be done more often. Similarly, washing machines mean that washing can be performed daily instead of weekly. Technological developments did not necessarily equate with saving time. (See Hardyment, p. 187.)

⁴²⁴ Cowan, p. 101.

Some loved their work and derived great satisfaction from it. Others heartily disliked certain features of their routine, such as wash-day, supervising bad servants, or struggling to make ends meet. A few loathed everything about housework and did as little of it as they could.⁴²⁵

Still, whatever their inclination, with little or no alternatives open to them, most middle-class women found themselves immersed in this life. Martha Vicinus writes that there was the murmur of private complaints about and criticisms of this narrow interpretation of the 'spinster's' duties.⁴²⁶ Carol Dyhouse suggests that such complaints may have been more widespread than has been thought – that the frustration and the uncertainty felt by the 'daughter at home' may not have been confined at a 'tiny feminist minority.'⁴²⁷ However, what is missing from these sources, and others like them, is any deeper penetration of the middle-class woman's everyday feelings about the life and the daily tasks facing her. And, again, this is where popular novels prove so useful – for they often detail such a woman's thoughts and her feelings – her reactions to her immediate surroundings and sometimes to her likely future.



Bennett's novels demonstrate diverse individual reactions to the role of women in the domestic realm – ranging from a loathing of domestic drudgery to an acceptance of this occupation, and stretching even to an embracing of domesticity, or if not an enthusiastic embracing of it, then at least the deriving of a feeling of satisfaction and self-worth from well-accomplished household duties. These observations, combined with numerous references to women's reactions to the various technological developments affecting housekeeping, illustrate that

⁴²⁵ Davidson, p. 193.

⁴²⁶ Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women. Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1985, p. 10.

⁴²⁷ Dyhouse, 'Mothers and Daughters', p. 42.

thoughts about domesticity, and about female participation in the domestic sphere, were neither uniform nor static.

Marie Corelli's books, without Bennett's subtleties or nuances, deliver a more straightforwardly didactic message – one that, in this chapter, requires much less space to explain than does Bennett's. Corelli's popular novels straddle the line between accepting the status quo and openly challenging it. They repeatedly contend that women are capable of being much more than domestic drudges – arguing that they have intellectual capabilities that, far from deserving to be buried beneath the heavy and demeaning burden of household chores, need to be explored and to find expression. However, typically she provides a number of qualifiers. In the first place, this rule really only applies to women of the middle and upper classes. Because she does not completely challenge or fully overturn the notion that women belong in the domestic realm, she has to retain a large portion of womankind to whom this ideal applies – namely, those women hailing from the lower rungs of late Victorian and Edwardian society. As a result, Corelli's novels idealise the role of working-class women in the domestic sphere – they present an image of these women as simple creatures who recognise their true place in the household and quietly accept it. Secondly, although Corelli argues that often middle-class women should reject domestic drudgery and embrace displays of their intellectuality, this only applies if these intellectual expressions are produced within the proper or appropriate sphere – in the very feminine private sphere. Her protagonists who challenge the confinement of women to household drudgery, frequently find alternative fulfilment in art and in writing. They produce these moral 'masterpieces' at home – even if the profound messages bound up within their work are intended to, and do reach a much wider public.

Looking at the novels of Bennett and Corelli together further enforces the argument that notions concerning the existence of separate but equal spheres were still very much alive at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, but that, again, they were neither static nor unchallenged. That Corelli

can voice her opposition to female domestic drudgery with such gusto indicates that there were general changes under way that affected views about the ‘proper’ role of women. Similarly, Bennett’s articulation of the loathing of female drudgery on the part of one notable character, the ‘new’ woman, Hilda Lessways, and his frequent references to technological developments affecting the performance of household chores, indicates that there were wider social shifts in progress concerning women and domesticity. However, the fact that most of his female protagonists, the ‘new’ woman included, find it impossible to ultimately escape domesticity supports the argument that few, if any, of these changes had filtered down to affect many individuals. In actuality, the status quo concerning female confinement to the domestic or private sphere was still largely in place, even though it was increasingly coming under challenge.



Bennett’s remarks about female domesticity are characteristically multi-layered. But often, like the rest of his society, he takes the performance of household management for granted. The image of a daughter or wife or mother unquestioningly carrying out household tasks was surely such a common sight that it tended to draw little individual attention, whether in actuality or in fiction. However, in numerous significant instances, Bennett holds true to the task of portraying the innerness of the ordinary middle-class woman by providing brief glimpses behind the domestic screens – into a private world whose proficient management was frequently assumed. He permits readers insights into the skills involved in, and the difficulties often deriving from, initial attempts at running a domestic establishment, subsequently making housekeeping a source of individual pride and self-worth for a multitude of the women who necessarily held this occupation. He also allows his audience to view the thoughts and actions of women, one in particular, Hilda Lessways, who loathes the domestic machine and the role of women within this mechanism, and who fears the everyday drudgery and boredom, and the tragic lack of larger opportunities that come with being

trapped in so minuscule and private a realm. And his depictions do not end here. In contrast to Hilda's feelings, for example, he provides at least two examples of unmarried women who gladly leave their respective posts as a teacher and a trainee clerk to embrace that of being a housekeeper. In these individual instances Bennett manages to effectively reverse the notion that domesticity simply shackled women to their conventional or expected position in life. And although Bennett depicts a range of domestic experiences, and of reactions to such experiences, he does not favour one over the other. What he does confirm is the very real continuing existence of the notion of separate spheres for men and women and he portrays both its positive and its tragic effects on the lives of young unremarkable unmarried women.

The domestic realm is a positive space for Anna Tellwright (*Anna of the Five Towns*). For her, domesticity and the home, especially the kitchen, hold several meanings. In the first place, the domestic realm is a place of familiarity and therefore of security. Secondly, domestic duties provide, not only a sense of purpose, but also a certain amount of personal control and personal power – in contrast to her relative powerlessness in other respects. And thirdly, external recognition of well-performed housekeeping duties rewards Anna with a feeling of pride and of personal fulfilment.

Anna's conscious awareness of her place in the domestic realm, and indeed of the value and the significance of this role to her, arrive at a young age. At nine years old, for example, she finds herself filled with 'secret childish revolt' at her father's decision to hire an elderly housekeeper to manage their home after the death of his second wife. The fact that Anna is already 'accomplished in all domesticity' proves to be the source of her frustration. And it is not until she is sixteen years old that she is permitted to assume the coveted position of 'mistress of the household, with a small sister to cherish and control'.⁴²⁸ From this age onwards, Bennett makes it clear that the role of 'housewife' is intrinsic to Anna's being.

⁴²⁸ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 15.

Anna announces to her suitor, Henry Mynors, that she is always at home, having little reason or opportunity to leave it.⁴²⁹ While in the house, it is entirely natural or instinctive for her to survey her domestic domain with ‘a housekeeper’s glance’.⁴³⁰ Indeed, conducting the smooth running of the household is so integral to Anna’s life that any disturbance of this duty, especially if brought about by Anna herself, causes feelings of guilt and even of dread. In one telling incident, Anna uncharacteristically forgets to buy the breakfast bacon. The reason for this lapse is very understandable – she is undergoing an inner struggle with her religious beliefs. Yet her fear of her father’s reaction to her oversight eclipses even her concern for the wellbeing of her soul. Anna’s father is more miserly and tyrannical than most parents and so Anna’s response is in reaction to that. However, it still stands that this ‘disarranging’ of the whole household ‘was a calamity unique in her experience’.⁴³¹ The mundane reality of the domestic domain affects Anna’s everyday existence more immediately, more directly than any concern that she has with the intangible spiritual realm.

The importance of Anna’s domestic role and realm is further consolidated by the fact that in times of emotional turmoil, whether that turmoil is welcome or unwelcome, the one place she desires, or even needs, to be is in ‘her kitchen’. For it is in this familiar environment that she feels most at comfort, most able to assess the developments taking place around her.⁴³² For Anna, this female-appointed sphere is a haven offering not only familiarity but also privacy and security, because, quite practically, it is in the familiar surrounds of her kitchen that she is most likely to be alone – free to contemplate, unhindered by the demands, and even by the attention, of those around her.

Furthermore, the domestic sphere yields other positive effects for Anna. Being her father’s household manager provides Anna with an immediate and daily sense of purpose; on numerous occasions successful accomplishment of her household

⁴²⁹ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 19.

⁴³⁰ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 10.

⁴³¹ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 52.

duties leaves her with a feeling of pride and self-confidence; and to a limited extent, her role in the domestic realm affords her a measure of control and a small degree of personal power. When Anna receives the respective praises of Mynors and of the highly esteemed Mrs Sutton regarding the orderliness and the cleanliness of her kitchen, she reacts with surprise – a sense of surprise that nonetheless carries with it a feeling of pride and satisfaction.⁴³³ Anna wants to be admired for her practical skills in this domain, for she believes that her own value or worth primarily lie in this realm of activity. And Bennett claims that Anna is not alone in this estimation of her self-worth. When probing the details of her kitchen, he adds:

It was a kitchen where, in the housewife's phrase, you might eat off the floor, and to any Bursley matron it would have constituted the highest possible certificate of Anna's character, not only as housewife but as elder sister.⁴³⁴

The scene, later in the novel, in which Anna contrasts herself to the privileged, highly 'ornamental' Beatrice Sutton further demonstrates this mentality. In Anna's mind, the thought that she could clean a set of stairs much better than Beatrice – 'this gay and flitting butterfly in a pale teagown' – more than compensates for the social and material advantages that the Sutton family, especially Beatrice, enjoy. Indeed, Anna's awareness of the competency of her domestic skills, combined with her faith in her own moral integrity, imbues her with a feeling of superiority over the decorative but relatively useless Beatrice.⁴³⁵

The extent to which Anna derives a sense of purpose and fulfilment and a limited degree of power from her role as household manager in her family home is only fully demonstrated when the measure of control that she has managed to attain in this realm is removed from her grasp. During a pivotal moment in Bennett's narrative, Anna makes the monumental decision to defy her father's authority. She

⁴³² For example, she feels this when she first becomes fully aware of Mynors' romantic aspirations – of his love for her. (See Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 7.)

⁴³³ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, pp. 73-74 and p. 94.

⁴³⁴ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 74.

destroys a forgery of a bill of exchange in order to save Willie Price, the man with whom she later comes to realise she is truly in love. Her father's anger at this act of disloyalty is so intense and unbending that he punishes her by taking away her housekeeping responsibilities and passing them onto her younger sister, Agnes.⁴³⁶ This crushingly symbolic act on the part of Mr Tellwright wounds Anna. And although it is a punishment imposed only briefly (for Anna soon resumes her household duties), this in no way reduces its significance. If anything its importance is enhanced because here Bennett shows just how effective threatening to remove Anna's main source of purpose, even her only source of purpose, actually is.

The domestic sphere also provides a daily sense of purpose for the quite conventional Maggie Clayhanger. Like Anna, the motherless Maggie unquestioningly accepts the duty of housekeeper for her father and her family. And again like Anna, she takes pride in the performing of her domestic responsibilities. However, unlike Anna's story, readers are given little insight into Maggie's character – into her thoughts, feelings or motivations.

Indeed, Maggie's very existence is so intertwined with her role as housekeeper that even her brother finds it difficult to separate them. Only occasionally is he jolted into acknowledging Maggie's life outside of that which revolves around serving him and his father. For example, seeing her conversing intimately with Janet Orgreave over the garden fence leads Edwin to rethink his view of his sister: 'What interested him, what startled him, was the youthful gesture and tone of Maggie. It pleased and touched him to discover another Maggie in the Maggie of the household.'⁴³⁷ This is not to say that Edwin is overly keen to embrace this new version of Maggie. His continual denial of the idea that there are any romantic sentiments existing between Maggie and the local vicar, despite evidence to the contrary, helps to demonstrate this.⁴³⁸ To Edwin, Maggie is the housekeeper

⁴³⁵ For example, see Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 62.

⁴³⁶ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 153.

⁴³⁷ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 362.

⁴³⁸ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, for example, pp. 358-359 and pp. 498-499.

– the sensitively capable woman who looks after his daily welfare. For the most part, therefore, and excluding a small number of instances when her work is referred to, Maggie remains as a silent representative, perhaps, of the numberless Victorian and Edwardian women whose daily existence and daily responsibilities were largely taken for granted.

In saying this, there are those few instances when Maggie's household endeavours are referred to – and such remarks certainly contribute to a reconstruction of turn of the century mentality regarding women and domesticity. At one point in the novel, fleeting reference is made to Maggie's workload and to the laborious and cumbersome nature of cleaning an older house – one decorated with older furniture and appliances.⁴³⁹ Not surprisingly, this observation of a pragmatic nature is made by another woman, Maggie's auntie Hamps, to the two men present, Edwin Clayhanger and his father. Pointing out how Maggie's cleaning burdens will be alleviated somewhat by the introduction of newer, more easily accessible fittings helps to ease the rising tension between her nephew and his father concerning the expenditure laid out for these new fittings.

More revealing of the perceived gap between male and female understanding of and attitudes towards the whole area of domestic management, however, is Edwin's own reaction to Maggie's approach to housekeeping when she dutifully continues to look after him after the death of their father.⁴⁴⁰ Edwin's appreciation of Maggie's thorough housekeeping and personal attention to detail illustrates just how valuable a 'perfect' housekeeper was. As Bennett notes, Edwin is 'touched' by 'the placid and perfect efficiency of Maggie as a housekeeper. Maggie gave him something that no money could buy.'⁴⁴¹ And for her part, Maggie immerses

⁴³⁹ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 179.

⁴⁴⁰ Little information is given regarding whether Maggie had any other alternative open to her, except in the latter stages of the novel, when it is hinted that a romantic affair of sorts had existed for years between Maggie and the recently deceased local vicar. Whatever the case, it remains that Maggie continued to keep house for her unmarried brother. (See Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 496.)

⁴⁴¹ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 494. This notion that the value of a fine housekeeper defies financial value is continued in Bennett's *Helen with the High Hand*. Here, James Ollerenshaw informs readers: 'you can't measure women (especially when they are good cooks), in terms of coin.'

herself completely in her responsibilities. For example, during the same episode, Maggie returns from helping her neighbour nurse a sick child to check on her brother's satisfaction and comfort. She had prepared everything before she left but, not trusting the servants, she returned early to check that they had carried out her every order.⁴⁴² Her sense of duty to her brother touches Edwin. Her efficiency and orderliness, as well as her warm consideration and attention, moves him to praise and, at least in this moment, to appreciate her. To Maggie, a domesticated woman, good housekeeping represents a job well done – a source of daily purpose and satisfaction. To Edwin, an often observant and thoughtful man, good housekeeping is a pleasing source of comfort and ease – one which he sometimes acknowledges and for which he is grateful.

Bennett's novels indicate overwhelmingly that domesticity was thought of as a 'woman's craft'.⁴⁴³ As will continue to be seen, his books demonstrate significant gaps between typical male and typical female approaches to domestic concerns. However, his books also refute any notion that women are either successful or happy household managers simply by reason of their sex. Training, experience and personal inclination perform vital roles.

In the first place, even the more domestically-inclined of Bennett's female characters have to learn their trade over a quite substantial period of time – perhaps the entire length of their childhood. *The Old Wives' Tale's* Constance Baines, for example, like Anna and Maggie, unquestioningly accepts the conventional role of domesticated daughter – enjoying embroidery and picking up

(Arnold Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, Alan Sutton, Gloucester, 1983 [1910], p. 97.) Of course, James's approach to the whole idea of his charming and extravagant niece, Helen, assuming the role of his housekeeper is comical. His rich appreciation of her domestic skills is ridiculously humorous. Yet, it still remains, that securing the loyalty of a skilful, efficient and, most of all perhaps, a personally attentive housekeeper represents the most successful acquisition to a bachelor's household.

⁴⁴² Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 497.

⁴⁴³ For example, see Arnold Bennett, *Leonora*, Books for Libraries Press, Plainview, New York, 1975 [1903], pp. 13-15.

on her mother's skills at pastry-making.⁴⁴⁴ Constance develops into a domesticated wife and mother – her sure pride in her home and in her housekeeping sometimes lying dormant only to awaken on special occasions, such as the much anticipated visit of her long absent sister, Sophia. Years after she has assumed the position of mistress of the family home, it is still widely recognised that there are few drawing-rooms in all of Bursley to compare with Constance's – a comparison that recalls Mrs Sutton and Henry Mynors' comments on the impeccable cleanliness and orderliness of Anna Tellwright's kitchen.⁴⁴⁵ And Constance does not acquire all the knowledge she has about running a household while living as a daughter under her mother's roof. On becoming mistress of the house, she continues to grow more competent. It is not until her mother's long-time servant, Maggie, hands in her resignation to Constance, for example, that this young and inexperienced wife has to learn how to handle servants and how to even begin searching for a worthy replacement.⁴⁴⁶

There are numerous instances within Bennett's novels when housekeepers receive praise from the women and men around them – praise from the former indicating that not all women reached the same level of domestic proficiency and that from the latter drawing attention to the differences that often exist between male and female perspectives of domesticity.

In Bennett's *Hilda Lessways*, Sarah Gailey effectively runs her half-brother, George Cannon's, series of boarding-houses. A former dance teacher who had to retire because of ill-health, Sarah is forced to earn a living using the only other skills that she possesses – her domestic skills. Yet, although Sarah despairs over her predicament, her inescapable position in the domestic machine, she is also equally aware of, and honest about, both her capabilities and her inadequacies concerning the whole business of domesticity. Cannon and the main character of

⁴⁴⁴ Arnold Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, Edinburgh, n.d. [1908], p. 9 and p. 36.

⁴⁴⁵ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 483.

⁴⁴⁶ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, pp. 143-146.

the novel, Hilda, are likewise aware of Sarah's achievements and failings. Sarah acknowledges that she can 'make a shilling go as far as anyone, and choose flesh-meat with anyone, too'.⁴⁴⁷ And Cannon certainly agrees with this appraisal. He informs Hilda that Sarah is 'so good at her job.' He continues:

She hasn't got a great deal of system, so far as I can see,
but she can get the work out of the servants without too
much fuss, and she's mighty economical in her catering!
Of course she can't get on the right side of a boarder – but
then I *can*! And that's the whole point! With me on the
spot, to *run* the place, she'd be perfect – perfect!⁴⁴⁸

Added to Sarah's list of shortcomings, besides charming clients, is that of keeping 'proper accounts' such as those Cannon expects.⁴⁴⁹ And this is where Hilda comes to the rescue. She agrees to lend her talents to the enterprise by looking after the financial records, while the older woman manages the rest. Still, as Hilda is aware, Sarah's skills – especially her organisational skills – outweigh her inadequacies in this realm. For when it is time to close one of Cannon's boarding-houses only to open another this time in Brighton, it is 'Sarah Gailey, the touchy and the competent',⁴⁵⁰ not Hilda or Cannon, who handles the 'closing of accounts, dismissals, inventories, bills, receipts, packing, decision concerning trains, reception of the former proprietor (especially that!), good-byes, superintending the stowage of luggage on the cab'.⁴⁵¹

Hilda and George Cannon recognise Sarah's skills, but each appreciates them differently. Hilda uses Cannon's declaration that Sarah is 'simply wonderful' because of her superb housekeeping skills as a platform for gaining a feeling of temporary superiority over him. His conviction that Sarah's skills were 'unique'

⁴⁴⁷ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 186.

⁴⁴⁸ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 210.

⁴⁴⁹ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 210.

⁴⁵⁰ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 189.

⁴⁵¹ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 189. Moreover, Sarah has advantages in this business that Hilda does not – for Hilda at one stage admits that even though she could work, 'she had not the art of making others work' – an art that the ailing spinster most certainly possesses. (Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 325.)

and so 'irreplaceable' should she leave his house, strikes Hilda as 'naïve'.⁴⁵² Moreover, his belief seems to her to be further evidence of 'the absurd family pride' she had often noticed in the Five Towns.⁴⁵³ However, his naivety is just as likely to be due to his lack of close experience, and therefore unfamiliarity, with this typically, even overwhelmingly, female sphere. To Hilda, as a woman much more familiar with the occupation of domesticity, this realm offers little to charm. Indeed, Sarah Gailey's position is tragic to Hilda. It is not to be admired. It certainly does not draw a sense of awe or of wonder. Sarah despairs of her position in life, but as a spinster, a former dance instructor now riddled with arthritis, she is offered little if any alternative. Hilda's superiority over Cannon is therefore explained by her awareness of the fact that Sarah is 'inexpressibly to be pitied' despite his enthusiastic appreciation of her great talents.⁴⁵⁴

Sophia Baines (*The Old Wives' Tale*) is much more successful as the manager of a boarding-house, or rather a Parisian pension, than the miserable Sarah Gailey. Sophia receives profuse praise from anyone, male or female, but especially male, who has the opportunity to see her domestic skills in close proximity. The highly dramatic French courtesan, Madame Foucault, with whom Sophia shares living quarters after being abandoned by her husband, finds herself 'deeply impressed' by Sophia's ability to quickly establish a respectable boarding-house.⁴⁵⁵ She witnesses the younger English woman's endeavours to prepare the apartment rooms for the new clients:

Madame Foucault was amazed at the thoroughness of her house-wifery, and at the ingenuity of her ideas for the arrangement of furniture. She sat and watched with admiration sycophantic but real.⁴⁵⁶

Furthermore, Sophia's foresight, economic prudence and her domestic thoroughness, especially in a time of economic and political crises, earn her the

⁴⁵² Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 176.

⁴⁵³ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 176.

⁴⁵⁴ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 210.

⁴⁵⁵ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 399.

complete admiration of her four male lodgers. Each of these men, Bennett informs readers, ‘appreciated their paradise’ – the paradise that Sophia had created single-handedly.⁴⁵⁷ She granted them a feeling of utter security with her competent running of the household. Her house was clean, honest and prompt. ‘Sophia never made a mistake, and never forgot.’⁴⁵⁸ ‘Quite naturally’, Bennett writes, ‘they came to regard her as the paragon and miracle of women.’⁴⁵⁹ Among their friends Sophia becomes legendary – ‘a young and elegant creature surpassingly beautiful, proud, queenly, unapproachable, scarcely visible, a marvellous manager, a fine cook and artificer of strange English dishes, utterly reliable, utterly exact with habits of order...!’⁴⁶⁰ And Sophia herself has no difficulty accepting this estimation of her worth. She is aware of her own attributes. Indeed, it was awareness of these, as well as a fierce desire to support herself after her husband had abandoned her and after spending months being nursed back to health by sympathetic strangers, that propels Sophia into the boarding-house business in the first place.

She ardently wished to be independent to utilise in her own behalf the gifts of organisation, foresight, common sense and tenacity which she knew she possessed and which had lain idle.⁴⁶¹

And it is these domestic skills and personal characteristics that enable her to be so successful with this enterprise.

In a much more humorous manner, Helen Rathbone (*Helen with the High Hand*) earns the adoring admiration of the man she comes to keep house for, her unmarried great step-uncle, James Ollerenshaw. From the moment that Helen enters her uncle’s house, it is clear that she is completely at home within the

⁴⁵⁶ Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, p. 399.

⁴⁵⁷ Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, p. 406. This part of the novel is set amid the turbulent backdrop of the Siege of Paris, 1870-1871.

⁴⁵⁸ Indeed, the ‘perfection of the domestic machine amazed these men’. (Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, p. 406.)

⁴⁵⁹ Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, p. 406.

⁴⁶⁰ Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, p. 406.

⁴⁶¹ Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, p. 402.

domestic environment. Like Anna, she surveys the house with a housekeeper's glance, noting its cleanliness, but also recognising that it is without a woman's touch.⁴⁶² She mentally records all the details of every room as she scans them.⁴⁶³ And with the simple act of making her uncle an omelette, she mesmerises him into desperately desiring to have her as his housekeeper – a charming replacement for the dour, tyrannous Mrs Butt.⁴⁶⁴ Helen's flair for cooking, as well as her charismatic personality and appearance, compare favourably with 'the gross unskilfulness, the appalling monotony' of Mrs Butt – his housekeeper of twenty-five years. And Bennett, in keeping with the novel's comic approach to Helen and James's relationship, ironically adds:

Could it be that there existed women, light and light-handed creatures, creatures of originality and resources, who were capable of producing prodigies like this kidney omelette, on the spur of the moment? Evidently! Helen existed.⁴⁶⁵

Furthermore, this miraculous process had not taken more than six minutes – and without leaving a mark on her fine dress.⁴⁶⁶

Humorous as this passage is, it is still historically informative, especially when read in the context of Arnold Bennett's other comments on domesticity. James remarks, in relation to the omelette, that Helen 'had tossed it off as he might have tossed off a receipt for a week's rent.'⁴⁶⁷ Clearly, this notion of expertise is gender-specific. Helen is proficient in the domestic sphere with which she is all too familiar; and her uncle is entirely comfortable with the tasks he is used to accomplishing in the more male realm of business. Each soon comes to benefit

⁴⁶² Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, pp. 30-31.

⁴⁶³ Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, p. 32.

⁴⁶⁴ Bennett, laughing at James's domestic naivety, adds: 'Had she really made this marvel, this dream, this idyll, this indescribable bliss, out of four common fresh eggs and a veal kidney that Mrs Butt had dropped on the floor?...And now he was ravished, rapt away on the wings of paradisaical ecstasy by something that consisted of kidney and a few eggs.' (Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, p. 42.)

⁴⁶⁵ Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, p. 42.

⁴⁶⁶ Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, pp. 42-43.

⁴⁶⁷ Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, p. 42.

from the other's skills. When Helen becomes James's housekeeper, his everyday standard of comfort rises and, due to the housekeeping money that her wealthy uncle delegates, Helen's level of household expenditure also increases.⁴⁶⁸

There is little doubt that Helen and James each benefit from the skills and knowledge of the other. Helen embraces the position of housekeeper for her uncle because it allows her to resign from her much despised post of teaching – an occupation she engages in only because of financial necessity. Furthermore, her uncle's wealth allows her greater opportunities of indulging her penchant for extravagance and luxury. James, on the other hand, benefits from having daily access to an extremely competent and pleasing housekeeper – one who manages his household without causing him either anxiety or discomfort.⁴⁶⁹ For Helen, domesticity provides a much more satisfactory means of earning a living than teaching. Whereas for James, a good domestic manager offers a greater degree of comfort, almost of luxury, than was previously available to him. Each benefits from the other's knowledge and skills in their respective realms, thereby reinforcing the value of the continuing existence of separate but complementary spheres.

⁴⁶⁸ That these characters benefit mutually from the skills and resources the other has to offer is made abundantly clear throughout the book. In one of the novel's most comic situations, for example, James believes that he is hoodwinking an innocent Helen to come and look after him and his home, while Helen simultaneously schemes to get rid of the former housekeeper while proving herself indispensable to her uncle so that he will insist on her assuming Mrs Butt's former role. (Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, pp. 44-45.)

⁴⁶⁹ From taking on the responsibility of finding an immediate replacement for the dour Mrs Butt to hiring an army of servants for their new home, Wilbraham Hall, Helen's worth is proved. (Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, pp. 45 and 140.) Her financial extravagance is forgotten in the midst of her uncle's desire to indulge in domestic comfort. Faith in Helen's competency manages to alleviate James's anxieties – whether in relation to expenditure, or more importantly, household organisation: 'Wilbraham Hall, once he became its owner, would be a worry - an awful worry. Well, would it? Would not Helen be entirely capable of looking after it, of superintending it in every way? He knew that she would!' (Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, p. 97.) Helen's charming femininity lightens the atmosphere of his home and her skills create a sense of luxurious comfort previously unknown. (For example, see Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, p. 51.) In return, Helen is given command over a substantial sum of housekeeping funds, the spending of which she does not confine solely to housekeeping needs.

Ethel Stanway is another of Arnold Bennett's female characters who chooses the occupation of housekeeper over a position of employment in the public sphere, in her case, as a clerk in the office of her father's works. Ethel's experiences are much less comical than Helen Rathbone's, and much more uncomfortable. Ethel's father orders his wife, Leonora, a veritable 'queen' of the domestic realm,⁴⁷⁰ supreme in household management,⁴⁷¹ to train one of their other daughters, Milly, in the craft of housekeeping, while he takes Ethel to work in his office.⁴⁷² Leonora carries out his orders, even while thinking that Ethel shows a gift for housekeeping, whereas the more effervescent Milly does not.⁴⁷³ Her judgement is correct. The unfortunate Ethel suffers a very brief and unsuccessful period in her father's office before resulting anxiety and sickness allows her to leave that position permanently. By the novel's end, she has assumed the role of wife and mother, immersing herself in daily domestic tasks. Milly, on the other hand, rejects a life of conventional domesticity, choosing instead to become a stage actress.

What is revealing in all of this is Bennett's insistence, not only that household management is a skill to be acquired, but that not all women are suited to the occupation. And training is not the only influential factor. So too are individuality and personal inclinations. Nor do Bennett's novels imply that proficiency in the domestic realm equates with enjoyment. He makes it clear that, as competent as she is, Ethel actually hates performing domestic duties.⁴⁷⁴ But she does not loathe them as much as she hates working in an office. And of course, familiarity plays an important role. Ethel is much more familiar with the world of domesticity; whereas she is completely lost in the world of business – significantly, it is her mother who predicts this, while her father is blind to the possibility.

⁴⁷⁰ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 77.

⁴⁷¹ Bennett, *Leonora*, pp. 13-14.

⁴⁷² Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 20.

⁴⁷³ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 20.

⁴⁷⁴ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 87.

There is little doubt that at the turn of the twentieth century domesticity was a woman's concern and that men and women experienced this domain differently. Added to those illustrative episodes and comments that have already been mentioned, for example, is the fact that Bennett entitles the chapter which revolves around the visit the solicitor, George Cannon, made to the Lessways' household, 'Domesticity Invaded'. The sheltered, rather insular, female-dominated world of Hilda, her mother and the young housemaid, Florrie, is abruptly contrasted with the confidently masculine public world of business, law and finance – the world to which Cannon belongs and which Hilda longs to join.⁴⁷⁵ Arthur Twemlow, a businessman in *Leonora*, on visit to Leonora's home, finds himself enchanted by the calm female world before him. The image of Leonora at home with the daughters strikes a chord within Twemlow – the 'intimate charm of the domesticity' subdues him - partly fulfilling a longing or an ideal that he had always harboured – of a domestic hearth of security and serenity.⁴⁷⁶

On numerous other occasions Bennett refers directly to the existence of separate male and female spheres. In one instance, for example, he describes Janet Orgreaves as 'a destined queen of the home' – a young woman 'content within her sphere'.⁴⁷⁷ In another he claims that Hilda Lessways 'had been in the male world, but not of it, as though encircled in a glass ball which neither she nor the males could shatter'.⁴⁷⁸ In *Leonora*, Bennett suggests that men can find themselves out of their depth in the female world of domesticity – such as her husband's rulings concerning the lives of their daughters – 'one of the failures which invariably followed John's interference in domestic concerns'.⁴⁷⁹

Even those of Bennett's male characters who do not consider themselves to be out of their depth in the domestic sphere still fully expect responsibility for keeping

⁴⁷⁵ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, pp. 30-39.

⁴⁷⁶ Bennett, *Leonora*, pp. 98 and p. 104.

⁴⁷⁷ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 66.

⁴⁷⁸ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 256; and see also the following chapter on 'Employment and Careers', p. 201.

the household in order to be placed on the shoulders of the mistress of the house. Edwin Clayhanger is Bennett's best example here. He searches out Hilda Lessways almost a decade after she broke off their engagement. What he finds is an unmarried mother, unsuccessfully running a Brighton boarding-house that is beset by bailiff's men. What strikes Edwin immediately after being confronted with the shock of seeing Hilda in serious financial straits, is the dilapidated state of her establishment and crude interior decorating. He notices every detail, scanning the room with a housekeeper's glance, in a manner not entirely unlike Anna Tellwright or Helen Rathbone. What he finds himself faced with is furniture monotonously arranged; furniture chosen 'in the most horrible taste'; an almost black ceiling; and a haphazard display of engravings – 'all distressing in their fatuous ugliness.'⁴⁸⁰

The whole room fulfilled pretty accurately the scornful scrupulous housewife's notion of a lodging-house interior.

It was suspect. And in Edwin there was a good deal, of the housewife. He was appalled.⁴⁸¹

He finds himself 'completely at a loss to reconcile Hilda with her environment.'⁴⁸² So, whereas Bennett shows that the separate spheres are not so rigid as to disallow some crossing-over, it still remains that housekeeping is primarily viewed as a female responsibility – to the point that any lapse in the successful fulfilling of this task on the part of a mistress of a household produces a shocked or appalled reaction – or, as in a very violent, very graphic instance involving Samuel Povey in *The Old Wives' Tale*, an angry, even scornful attitude. Certainly Samuel Povey, Constance Baines' conservative-minded husband in *The Old Wives' Tale*, believes housekeeping to be solely the woman's duty. When tragedy strikes his brother, Daniel's home, Samuel visits. He discovers that Daniel has killed his alcoholic wife in a fit of wrath. He also finds the house to be 'in a shameful condition of

⁴⁷⁹ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 140.

⁴⁸⁰ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, pp. 446-447.

⁴⁸¹ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 447.

⁴⁸² Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 447.

neglect'.⁴⁸³ In his mind, his brother's alcoholic wife had failed to perform her duties.

Was it possible that a house-mistress could so lose her self-respect? Samuel thought of his own abode, meticulously and impeccably 'kept', and a hard bitterness against Mrs Daniel surged up in his soul.⁴⁸⁴

The relatively inexperienced Samuel's thoughts and previously unquestioned ideals were being challenged. On seeing the body of Mrs Daniel Povey, Samuel is struck with both fear and disgust:

A wife and mother! The lady of a house! The centre of order! The fount of healing! The balm for worry, and the refuge of distress! She was vile. ...She was the dishonour of her sex, her situation, and her years. She was a fouler obscenity than the inexperienced Samuel had ever conceived.⁴⁸⁵

Samuel's severe reaction draws on two jealously guarded assumptions. One is that, for Samuel, the domestic ideal is considered to be very real. Such notions are not simply confined to the realm of fantasy. Instead they assume a very real manifestation – Samuel expects women to conform to popular ideals. Furthermore, his response to his brother's house and disreputable wife demonstrates how strong the link was between the occupation of housekeeping and self-respect. Keeping a clean, tidy and morally secure home for her husband and son is expected to provide Mrs Daniel Povey with her main, even sole, source of pride and purpose (as it does, for example, in the case of Anna Tellwright).⁴⁸⁶ The example of his own wife, Constance, works to reinforce the validity of these ideas and expectations in Samuel's mind. For Constance is the near perfect image

⁴⁸³ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 222.

⁴⁸⁴ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 222.

⁴⁸⁵ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 223.

⁴⁸⁶ Leonora, a wife and mother, and main character in Bennett's novel of the same title, also conforms to this notion. The home is Leonora's domain – she 'made' it. She is the supreme organiser, the manager. And she is very good at her job. Indeed, her supremacy in this area is recognised by the other ladies in her community. Domesticity is a 'woman's craft' and Leonora excels in it – an achievement in which she takes great pride. (Bennett, *Leonora*, pp. 13-14.)

of the domesticated women. She is the spiritual and moral centre of their orderly and clean home. And Bennett argues that Samuel is not alone in these beliefs.

Victorian and Edwardian appreciation of women in the domestic domain frequently went further than admiring their practical skills and incorporated the more intangible realms of idealism and spirituality. The image of the queens of the domestic realm was very much linked to the popular notion that women were spiritually superior to men – a connection that further supports the continuing strength of the Victorian and Edwardian notion that domesticity was solely a female sphere. Certainly, Janet Orgreave, ‘a destined queen of the home’, upholds these spiritually ideal links.⁴⁸⁷ And to Edwin Clayhanger, Janet has all the sweetness, grace, dignity and goodness of the ideal woman.⁴⁸⁸ Even Henry Mynors’ appreciation of Anna Tellwright and her kitchen is imbued with something deeper than an awareness of her practical skills. Mynors’ pleasure in seeing the calm and orderly state of Anna’s kitchen is enhanced by his projection of strands of popular domestic idealism onto the scene. He admits that there is ‘nothing to beat a clean, straight kitchen’ and that there never will be. But he adds

It wants only the mistress in a white apron to make it complete. Do you know, when I came in here the other night, and you were sitting at the table there, I thought the place was like a picture.⁴⁸⁹

To Anna, the kitchen is a room in which to carry out her daily housekeeping duties; to Mynors, unfamiliar with the more intimate details of running a household, this room embodies an ideal to which he, and many of his era, subscribe.

Indeed, Bennett makes even more direct reference to the spiritual dimension of domesticity on many other occasions. In *Anna of the Five Towns*, he describes the

⁴⁸⁷ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 66.

⁴⁸⁸ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, pp. 187-188.

⁴⁸⁹ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 74.

furniture that makes up her kitchen. He pays particular attention to a family dresser:

Seventy years of continuous polishing by a dynasty of priestesses of cleanliness had given to this dresser a rich ripe tone which the cleverest trade-trickster could not have imitated.⁴⁹⁰

To the pragmatic and domesticated Anna, this piece of furniture is ‘merely ‘the dresser’’.⁴⁹¹ Moreover, it is a dresser that lacks a useful cupboard. But to many others its value transcends its mere usefulness, becoming an item of curious, even aesthetic worth. It is Bennett’s comment that it was the time and care that a generation of ‘priestesses’ had invested in this object that accounts for its present value that establishes a clear link between domestic idealism and worth in popular consciousness.

In another instance, Hilda Lessways typically critiques the whole ‘business’ of domesticity – a business that she believes is loaded with far too much importance. Domesticity, Hilda reasons, is not life itself – it is ‘at best the clumsy external machinery of life’. And yet, she has observed that ‘half the adult population [doubtless the female half] worshipped it as an exercise sacred and paramount, enlarging its importance and with positive gusto permitting it to monopolize their existence’. Hilda’s mother is one of these – a woman nine-tenths of whose conversation is concerned with ‘the business of domesticity – and withal Mrs Lessways took the business more lightly than most!’⁴⁹² So common is this connection between domesticity and spiritual idealism that Arnold Bennett feels free to pass humorously ironic remarks about it. For example, James Ollerenshaw in *Helen with the High Hand* takes this whole business of domestic comfort very seriously – to the point of comic absurdity. His niece’s omelettes represent, for him, the marvel of the many superb accomplishments of modern young women. And he is certainly susceptible to the sacredness of domesticity and to the whole

⁴⁹⁰ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 73.

⁴⁹¹ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 73.

notion of the domestic goddess - his view is that his whole way of living has been affected in a positive, almost religious, manner in the short time that Helen had assumed responsibility for his housekeeping.

For days and days he had imagined himself in heaven with
a seraph who was also a good cook.⁴⁹³

James' feverish enthusiasm is intermittingly tempered by Helen's extravagance. Nevertheless, after a quarter of a century of enduring the dour company and plain food of the crotchety housekeeper, Mrs Butt, he is entirely willing to allow himself to be captivated by the angelic charms and the superb skills of his niece.

Doubtless, intimate knowledge of the workings of the household and first hand experience with cooking and cleaning serves to rob domesticity of any spiritual connotations. This point certainly helps readers to understand why turn of the century men, who had little if any direct involvement in the running of a household, tended to subscribe to such idealistic notions – and why many of the women of the era supported a much more pragmatic appreciation of this sphere and occupation.

Of course, there were middle-class women who did not appreciate this sphere in any way. Hilda Lessways rejects domesticity as an absurdly wasteful occupation. She recognises that it consumes the lives of most of the middle-class women of her time and she also clearly realises that she will never be able to make these women see just how 'ridiculous' this whole preoccupation with housekeeping is:

All over the town, in every street of the town, behind all
the nice curtains and blinds, the same hidden shame was
being enacted: a vast, sloppy, steaming, greasy, social
horror – inevitable! It amounted to barbarism, Hilda
thought in her revolt. She turned from it with loathing.
And yet nobody else seemed to turn from it with loathing.

⁴⁹² Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 36.

⁴⁹³ Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, pp. 50-51.

Nobody else seemed to perceive that this business of domesticity was not life itself, was at best the clumsy external machinery of life. On the contrary, about half the adult population worshipped it as an exercise sacred and paramount, enlarging its importance and with positive gusto permitting it to monopolize their existence.⁴⁹⁴

Hilda's overwhelming frustration with domestic preoccupations is not typical of middle-class women of her era. Women 'with a sufficient income, a comfortable house, and fair health', Bennett argues, are much more likely to accept their position within the domestic realm, than to question it as Hilda does.⁴⁹⁵ And, as Bennett's 'new woman', it is understandable, as well as expected, that Hilda's views will differ from those of her more conventional peers.

There are many things about domesticity that offend Hilda. In the first place, there is the lack of higher ambition that is associated with such menial, unintellectual tasks. Secondly, she despises the squalor that accompanies the physical side of life. Thirdly, she has no tolerance for the chaos and the inefficiency that characterises this realm. And finally, Hilda objects to what she identifies as the more sinister effects of being forced to reside, fully submerged, in the squalid world of housework.

For Hilda values life if it is directed by ambition of a higher nature – if it is guided by intellectual or by spiritual concerns. Housekeeping does not fulfil this criterion. On the contrary, housekeeping represents all that is physical in life. The life of a typical Edwardian middle-class woman, then, is 'incomprehensible' and 'offensive' to her. And because her mother is the woman closest to Hilda who exemplifies this type of life, she is often the figure at whom her daughter's frustration is directed:

⁴⁹⁴ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 36.

⁴⁹⁵ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 10.

At the end of a day devoted partly to sheer vacuous idleness and partly to the monotonous simple machinery of physical existence – everlasting cookery, everlasting cleanliness, everlasting stitchery – her mother did not with a yearning sigh demand, ‘Must this sort of thing continue for ever, or will a new era dawn?’ Not a bit! Mrs Lessways went to bed in the placid expectancy of a very similar day on the morrow, and of an interminable succession of such days.⁴⁹⁶

Moreover, although the chief aim of housewifery is to organise the material or physical side of private existence, this is a realm of activity that Hilda believes sorely lacks any real measure of order or of efficiency. Such an absence only accentuates life’s inherently squalid nature. And so, Hilda detests the conventional female role of housekeeper because the ‘odious mess of the whole business of domesticity’ disgusts her. She is ashamed of the open squalor of housework – ‘to such a point that she would have preferred to do it with her own hands in secret rather than see others do it openly in all its squalor’.⁴⁹⁷ She resents the entire domestic industry which she believes does not promote the need for an organised business-like approach and so is not treated in such a manner.

Furthermore, Hilda rejects domesticity, not simply as a harbourer of inefficiency, but also of something more individually destructive – if not exactly for the mistresses of middle-class households, then at least for the working-class women who are engaged to perform the bulk of the physical tasks. Florrie, the young Lessways servant, exemplifies this. On first meeting the thirteen year old Florrie, Hilda regards her with a mixture of pity and sadness. She watches as her mother introduces her new maid to her new life of domestic chores and knows that she is witnessing ‘the first stage in the progress of a victim of the business of

⁴⁹⁶ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 10.

⁴⁹⁷ Later in life her views do not change. Even the smells of basement kitchens rising to meet her as she walks the streets of Brighton, and their obvious associations with the whole appalling

domesticity'. This 'charming young creature, full of slender grace' will fall prey to the demands of the life she will be expected to lead – a life immersed in all the squalor of the home. Her only fate, Hilda firmly believes, is that which sees her metamorphosed into a 'dehumanized drudge'.⁴⁹⁸ Domesticity is not simply degrading; for Hilda, it also conceals elements that are more ominous and foreboding.

What is important for historians to note, however, is the fact that no matter how ambitious or how determined Hilda is to escape the conventional life of a Late Victorian or Edwardian middle-class woman, she cannot. She may do so temporarily – she manages to secure a short-term clerical position, for example – but her reprieve from a domestic existence is frustratingly short-lived. In only the fifth chapter of the novel, after experiencing a brief adventure in the world of journalism, Hilda discovers that 'Domesticity had closed in on her once more'.⁴⁹⁹ By the novel's final chapters, she is without hope of liberty – for her, soon to be a single mother and with a despairing and ailing spinster to support in Sarah Gailey, and sole control over a boarding house that she knows she does not have the skills to run successfully, the future looms 'appalling':⁵⁰⁰

she envisaged the years to come, the messy and endless struggle, the necessary avarice and trickeries incidental to it – and perhaps the ultimate failure....And she pictured what she would be in ten years: the hard-driven landlady, up to every subterfuge – with a child to feed and educate, and perhaps a bedridden, querulous invalid to support. And there was no alternative to this tableau.⁵⁰¹

business of domesticity, and further of the physical messiness of life – repulse her. (See Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 325.)

⁴⁹⁸ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 36.

⁴⁹⁹ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 45.

⁵⁰⁰ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 325.

⁵⁰¹ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, pp. 325-326.

By the end of the novel, therefore, she is frustrated at the knowledge that she alone cannot affect the relentless machinery of domesticity.⁵⁰²

Hilda cannot manage to escape a life of domesticity because there are few alternative paths open to her. However, Bennett's novel also shows that Hilda's other responses to events taking place around her also shackle her to a conventionally female existence. Filial duty, a sense of loyalty to her mother – a much publicised expectation of Victorian and Edwardian women – helps to end her experiences in the public world of employment.⁵⁰³ An ardent desire to feel useful to those around her performs a similar task. Hilda knows that by helping the ailing spinster, Sarah Gailey, or her former employer, George Cannon – that by giving into these emotional concerns, she is effectively giving up her much cherished hope for 'freedom and change and luxury'.⁵⁰⁴ Still, she places remaining true to these instincts, typically considered feminine instincts, over her own personal desires and sense of inner well-being. Furthermore, the small degree of enjoyment and even of superiority that she feels over the worldly George Cannon, who 'naively' assumes that domestic skills are 'unique' and 'irreplaceable', affords her enough of a sense of purpose to not reject outright any amount of participation in this sphere.⁵⁰⁵ And lastly, Hilda's natural yearnings for sexual fulfilment and for marriage, as for most other Late Victorian and Edwardian women, sees that she is firmly reinstated in the home and in the

⁵⁰² Hilda views domesticity as an unrelenting machine or as an interminable organism. She refers, for example, to the 'the organism of the boarding house' – an organism that appears pathetically tragic and sorrowful. However, this is also the organism that manages to swallow up most of her life – up until Edwin Clayhanger rescues her and her son a decade or so after the collapse of her marriage. (See Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 209.)

⁵⁰³ Hilda temporarily chooses loyalty to her job in the newspaper office over that to her mother in that she does not immediately run to her mother's sick bed in London once she is informed of her ailing condition. As a result her mother dies without Hilda by her side. Hilda believes that she is able to achieve a sense of freedom and disenfranchisement by ridding herself of all of her mother's and her belongings (including the family home). However, the consequent guilt and overwhelming grief that Hilda feels concerning her tremendous lapse in her filial duty leads to a nervous breakdown that ends her employment experiences. (Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, pp. 125-126, p. 131, and pp. 172-173.)

⁵⁰⁴ See Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 186. For further discussion of Hilda's sense of duty to Sarah Gailey and George Cannon see Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, pp. 103-109, pp. 113-120, p. 177, and p. 305.

⁵⁰⁵ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 176.

domestic sphere. As has been argued, the material opportunities are not there for Hilda to seize on in order to flee a conventional life. But neither are the emotional opportunities. As Bennett's in-depth treatment of this 'new woman' illustrates, Edwardian women often found that they could not evade the social and economic realities of their era, but, equally importantly, often they could not escape the emotional and the moral concerns that formed a substantial part of their upbringing.

What is perhaps surprising about Hilda's example is the degree of similarity that appears between the thoughts of this 'new woman' and those espoused in Marie Corelli's bestselling fiction. Like Corelli, who will be discussed shortly, Hilda repudiates the notion that housekeeping is the highest spiritual calling that a woman at the turn of the twentieth century can receive. Additionally, Hilda solidly rejects the material side of domesticity, but, like Corelli on a much more sophisticated level, she accepts numerous aspects of popular domestic idealism. For example, in what could be viewed as something of a paradox, despite her deep reverence for female independence, Hilda's ambitions also display a degree of acceptance for the ideal of male supremacy. She longs to reject the prominence of housework in women's lives but she does not wish to reject the very mid-Victorian ideal of becoming the wife of an influential man. What this novel, and many of Bennett's other works, demonstrates, then, is that there is little evidence to indicate that the degree of frustration that Hilda Lessways experiences in reaction to domestic expectations is in any way typical of the feelings of a majority of the women of the era. Indeed, there is little doubt that Late Victorian and Edwardian women continued to spend most of their time absorbed in their domestic affairs – whether they were content to do so or not. However, given the popularity of many of Bennett's books and given the bestselling status of most of Corelli's, it also stands that very visible challenges to certain strains of domestic idealism were in general circulation at the turn of the twentieth century.

Widespread public awareness of technological developments that were designed to increase the efficiency and the ease with which domestic chores were carried out, as illustrated in Bennett's popular fiction, further indicate that dominant ideas about this topic were in no way static. The whole business of domesticity was undergoing change – in attitudes and in the very visible form of technological development – changing attitudes indubitably influencing developments in the field of domesticity, as well as these more material developments doubtless affecting mentality shifts.

True to the aim of portraying the details of a mundane reality, Bennett writes numerous passages throughout his collection of novels that make reference to daily domestic chores and that outline technological changes affecting the carrying out of these domestic duties. The frequency of his voiced concerns and the extent to which he investigates how far the material conditions of the domestic environment affect the lives of his individual characters reflects a widespread interest in everyday domestic concerns on the part of his readership. Significantly, however, only the more socially mobile of his characters benefit from these technological improvements, implying that although interest in such developments was high, widespread access to them was not.

The longest and most explorative of these is Bennett's description of Denry Machin's new home in *The Card*. Denry works hard to persuade his mother to leave their run-down cottage for a smarter, more comfortable house, one fitting Denry's growing stature in the town. Moving into a house complete with all the advantages that technological advancement can offer boosts Denry's considerable degree of pride. And Bennett uses almost eight pages to illustrate this - describing how he demonstrated to his mother, and another local matron, Mrs Cotterill, just how efficient and easy to clean modern commodities had made this establishment.

The range and the diversity of the commodities that Denry points out in this passage illustrates the extent to which Bennett was interested in the minute detail of household management. Moreover, it also reveals something of the immensity

of the tasks involved in keeping an Edwardian house in order. Mrs Machin and Mrs Cotterill are suitably impressed, even amazed, by the provisions made for the ease of cleaning, such as: marble doorsteps with taps that expel jets of steam for increased comfort and cleanliness; an abundance of electric lights, still ‘a novelty’ in Bursley⁵⁰⁶; a whole house heated by steam rather than by fireplaces; every knob being made of black china which only requires a damp cloth to wipe away dirt and dust; aluminium taps expelling running hot and cold water and marble sinks in every upstairs bedroom; black enamelled iron bedsteads that are light to lift; floors covered in linoleum, with rugs that ‘could be shaken with one hand’; no sharp corners anywhere – to facilitate cleaning; an absolutely waterproof bath-room that could be sprayed with a hose and that provided a constant supply of hot water; right down to earthenware table services and kitchen containers and electroplated forks and spoons; and, topping it all off, a vacuum-cleaner – the vacuum cleaner at that time, Bennett ironically adds, being ‘the last word of civilization’ in Bursley.⁵⁰⁷

Furthermore, every feature that Denry draws to his mother’s attention is accompanied by explanations, sometimes very extensive explanations, as to their respective benefits. Steam heating a house, he reasons, means:

No grates to polish, ashes to carry down, coals to carry up,
mantlepieces to dust, fire-irons to clean, fenders to polish,
chimneys to sweep.⁵⁰⁸

In addition, all the furniture and fixtures are designed to be cleaned with ease. The fact that all pieces of furniture are enamelled, for instance, means that they can be ‘wiped with a cloth in a moment instead of having to be polished with three cloths and many odours in a day and a half’.⁵⁰⁹ The heavy labour involved in keeping a typical turn-of-the-century house orderly and clean, without the advantages afforded by technological advances, is certainly communicated in this statement.

⁵⁰⁶ The radiant effect of electric light is also discussed in Bennett, *Clayhanger*, see p. 174.

⁵⁰⁷ Bennett, *The Card*, pp. 182-189.

⁵⁰⁸ Bennett, *The Card*, p. 184.

⁵⁰⁹ Bennett, *The Card*, p. 188.

The advantages of having running water also feature heavily in Bennett's fiction – especially in *The Card* and in *Clayhanger*. In *The Card*, Bennett points out that a hot and cold water system operating upstairs and downstairs and sinks in every bedroom guaranteed –

No portorage of water anywhere in the house. The water came to you, and every room consumed its own slops.⁵¹⁰

And the benefits of this system are given even more attention in *Clayhanger*. Here Bennett describes the new home's cistern-room; the precise operation of the cistern; the water pipe system which made the former practice of carrying water up and down stairs obsolete; the huge bathroom devoted solely to baths and the 'huge painted zinc bath' that it contained; as well as the vast porcelain basins and surrounding tiles that permitted splashing – splashing being 'one of the most voluptuous pleasures in life' and one that had been known, in their previous 'shop-house', to have caused Mrs Nixon, the cleaning help, to have actually wept.⁵¹¹ To further reinforce the labour-intensiveness and to emphasise the almost spiritual significance of cleanliness during this era, Edwin adds:

Splashing was immoral. It was as wicked as amorous dalliance in a monastery. In the shop-house godliness was child's play compared to cleanliness.⁵¹²

In a society so overrun with domestic appliances such as ours, it may be difficult to appreciate the enormous significance of, and indeed the sense of marvel and of excitement caused by, such extensively detailed descriptions of these technological innovations – whether small, even seemingly petty, or admittedly considerable, even colossal.

Much has already been said on the issue of differing male and female perceptions of domesticity and such diverging attitudes do continue into the realm of technological innovations as they concern work carried out within the home.

⁵¹⁰ Bennett, *The Card*, p. 187.

⁵¹¹ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, pp. 173-174.

There is no doubt that both men and women show appreciation for developments affecting domesticity in Bennett's novels. However, there is also no doubt that men and women are moved in different ways. Men, like Denry Machin and Edwin Clayhanger, welcome these changes; they even go out of their way to introduce them into their households. But they do not experience the practical effects of these improvements in the way that the women in their lives do – the housewives or at least housekeepers like Denry's mother, Mrs Machin, and Edwin's sister, Maggie Clayhanger. Domesticity consumes the lives of these women. Technological developments, therefore, serve to make their lives easier. Whereas for men, the main effect is to increase the degree of comfort, even of luxury, in which they live.

Denry Machin is obviously proud of the innovations that render his house the most advanced in all of Bursley. His ego certainly benefits from awareness of this fact. Mrs Machin's reaction, on the other hand, is much more tempered. She is certainly amazed by the extent to which domestic appliances and fixtures have been improved (the vacuum cleaner causes her to call down blessings on herself, for example).⁵¹³ But, for the most part, she considers these changes in a very pragmatic manner. The electric light display, for instance, forces her to admit that it is surely less complicated than oil lamps.⁵¹⁴ Her concluding thoughts, after surveying all that her son has to show her, is that this home has to be 'the most sensible kind of a house' that she has ever seen.⁵¹⁵ And the reaction of the other matron present, Mrs Cotterill, is similar. In her mind, all the practical innovations are guaranteed to make the running of a household cheaper and more efficient and the life of a housekeeper more comfortable:

I could run this household without a servant and have myself tidy by ten o'clock in a morning.⁵¹⁶

⁵¹² Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 174.

⁵¹³ Bennett, *The Card*, p. 188.

⁵¹⁴ Bennett, *The Card*, p. 183.

⁵¹⁵ Bennett, *The Card*, p. 189.

⁵¹⁶ Bennett, *The Card*, p. 188.

A modern house is considered a blessing by these two veterans of the domestic realm because it promises to decrease the amount of time spent managing a household, increases the ease with which chores are completed, and swells the amount of time that can be legitimately devoted to oneself.⁵¹⁷

Edwin Clayhanger's appreciation of the same improvements lies on an altogether different plane. The new Clayhanger residence affects Edwin in a 'deep and spiritual sense'.⁵¹⁸ He does not simply appreciate it for its pragmatism.

The new house inspired him. It was not paradise. But it was a temple.⁵¹⁹

Edwin's praise of the new hot-water system in particular verges on the aesthetic. It touches him 'like a poem'; the water mounts the pipes 'magically'; the whole set-up is both 'marvellous' and 'romantic'; and the entire house, each room from the 'scientific kitchen' to the 'vast scullery', thrills him to 'fine impulses'.⁵²⁰ Significantly, Bennett again points to the differences between male and female appreciation of the business of domesticity by contrasting this example of male lyricism with that of female pragmatism. Edwin's auntie Hamps, for example, regards her nephew's new mounted bedroom shelves as an absolute blessing for his sister, Maggie, who will be spared the task of cleaning the difficult-to-reach corners of the old wooden bookcases.⁵²¹ But Edwin only regards them as modern fixtures of aesthetic value, not of practical worth. And this is understandable, for Edwin, like Denry, indeed like most men in this period, is not burdened with the

⁵¹⁷ In *Helen with the High Hand*, Bennett refers to the precious advantages of labour-saving innovations. In this case, he draws particular attention to the gas cooking-stove, calling it a 'wondrous gift of Heaven'. He continues: 'You do not have to light it with yesterday's paper, damp wood, and the remains of last night's fire. In twelve minutes not merely was the breakfast ready, but the kitchen was dusted, and there was a rose in a glass next to the bacon'. The efficiency of this stove and the ease with which it is operated benefits James Ollerenshaw in that he gets his breakfast in good time. But it affects his niece and housekeeper, Helen, and the servant, Georgiana, more keenly in that it reduces the amount of time they have to spend labouring over the actual preparation of the meal – a daily task in which James is neither expected to involve himself nor concern himself with. (See Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, p. 65.)

⁵¹⁸ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 173.

⁵¹⁹ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 174.

⁵²⁰ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, pp. 173-174.

⁵²¹ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 179.

task of cleaning the household fixtures, whereas Maggie, like most women of her era, is.



Marie Corelli's approach to the whole issue of domesticity is entirely different from Bennett's. Her bestselling novels make no pretension to be interested in the mundane details of everyday domestic duties. Their concern lies with ideal notions of women's place and worth in Late Victorian and Edwardian society, not with mirroring domestic realities. So, whereas Bennett's writing contributes towards building up a picture of the business of domesticity as many 'ordinary' middle-class late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women experienced it, Corelli's is much more valuable in helping to capture popular notions of domestic idealism as they were reshaped to incorporate social and moral shifts at the turn of the twentieth century. As such then, and as fiction lacking Bennett's subtleties of observation, less space is required to deal with Corelli's contributions to a history of domesticity than was required for Bennett's.

Corelli's approach to the issue of women and domesticity is sometimes surprising. Quite predictably, she addresses this topic as she addresses every other – with an often frustrating degree of ambiguity. But, contrary to her usual method of couching more traditional notions concerning the expected role of middle-class women in a highly spiritual, highly idealised tone, Corelli effectively strips this overwhelmingly female business of domesticity of any substantial spiritual connection – at least as far as her middle-class female protagonists are concerned. Contrary to unquestioningly upholding the idealistic notion that the roles of wife and mother elevate women to the moral pedestal that is rightfully theirs, Corelli's books repeatedly assert that there are instances when assuming these roles acts to degrade and demean women – especially when concentrating on a woman's domestic skills results in her intellectual abilities being completely overlooked. Again, this applies only to the women of the middle and upper classes. Women

from the lower strata, particularly those who fill the necessary positions of domestic servants, are not treated in the same manner. With little opportunity of displaying the merits of their intellectual skills over those put to use in the domestic realm, women from the lower classes have few chances of escaping their domestic obligations, whether these are considered degrading to Corelli's ideal of femininity or not.

Of course, this is not to argue that women from the upper rungs of Late Victorian and Edwardian society are exempt from expectations of conforming to notions of feminine idealism. On the contrary, they undergo rigorous testing as to how well they meet many of these ideal criteria. Her female protagonists are undoubtedly expected to fulfil the important ideals of the domestic queen in that they should be loving, modest, innocent and always supportive of the man in their life – whether their husbands, relatives, friends, or, in the absence of any of these, God Himself. Furthermore, they are certainly expected to regard the domestic sphere as their rightful place. But they are not expected to confine their activities to the more mundane chores associated with household management. Rather than this, they are permitted, even encouraged, for example, to produce works of literary and artistic merit within this safe and secure realm. So, what Corelli's books exempts these women from, then, is the more physical aspects of domesticity – the drudgery associated with carrying out household tasks – not the more spiritual or moral implications of domestic idealism. In this way, Corelli conveniently pleases both her desire to assert that mid-Victorian notions of femininity such as modesty and unworldliness still apply in a transitional society that at the same time enables greater numbers of women to test their values in a wider, more public world, and dictates that in an increasingly 'modern' society women's intellectual capabilities deserve stronger recognition – certainly above that given to the mere physical duties that they perform (referring to housework and even stretching as far as to include maternity). Her highly popular novels demonstrate to historians that the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century exhibited shifts in attitude concerning the proper role of women that amount to a significant modification and

reshaping of the ideal model of femininity that was promoted throughout much of the latter half of the nineteenth century.

On a number of occasions, Corelli effectively challenges domestic idealism by arguing that marriage carries with it the potential to cause degradation to the female partner. In *The Life Everlasting*, for example, the highly spiritual Aselzion preaches that men and women can each make tragic mistakes when it comes to choosing a marriage partner. Much more emphasis is placed on the effects on the wife, however. It suffices for her novels to claim that for a man, his wife and children can drag him down. But, when it comes to women, Corelli contends, in a more specific fashion, that a husband's low opinion of his wife's intellect 'coarsens and degrades her to a level from which it is impossible to rise!'⁵²² The married woman brought to such a low point becomes 'a mere domestic drudge or machine, with no higher aims than are contained in the general ordering of household business'.⁵²³ In many ways, these sentiments are remarkably close to those expressed by Bennett's frustrated 'New Woman' character, Hilda Lessways – at first sight, a surprising comparison given Corelli's usual scorn of the New Woman.

Corelli's low estimation of housekeeping finds further expression in *The Master-Christian*. What stands out in this novel is how close Corelli comes to completely reversing the domestic ideal. Instead of equating the roles of wife and mother with that of Coventry Patmore's 'The Angel in the House', one of Corelli's characters implies that such a position is more akin to that of an angel falling. At one point in the book, Marquis Fontenelle explains that he desires to give the charming, coquettish Sylvie Hermenstein flowers, lace, a charming boudoir and a world full of romance. This cannot be so, he declares, if she were to be his wife. To ask her to be his wife, Fontenelle argues, would be insolent on his part, because he equates being a mistress with receiving romantic overtures and being a wife with being

⁵²² Marie Corelli, *The Life Everlasting. A Reality of Romance*, Methuen, London, 1911, p. 409.

⁵²³ Corelli, *The Life Everlasting*, p. 409.

expected to take care of the housekeeping and keeping the tradesmen's books in order. To ask Sylvie to marry him, he declares,

would be like asking an angel just out of heaven to cut off
her wings and go downstairs and cook [his] dinner!⁵²⁴

This statement is, of course, immediately qualified by the reader's knowledge of the fact that Fontenelle is a thoroughly decadent aristocrat. However, there is little in the rest of the novel, or throughout many of Corelli's other books, to indicate that she does not at least partly agree with this argument regarding the degrading effects of conventional marriages on women. She never endorses sexual immorality, but she does strenuously promote the value of a woman's intellect over her housekeeping skills.

Corelli's defence of the unmarried writer, Mavis Clare, in *The Sorrows of Satan* further consolidates her position on this point. Mavis Clare deviates from the mid-Victorian ideal of womanhood in that she is a single woman with no prospects of marriage. However, unlike Fontenelle's concept of a wife, Mavis's divinity is completely assured – as illustrated by the numerous references to her as 'angelic'.⁵²⁵ Mavis conforms to one of Corelli's ideal models of Late Victorian womanhood, namely the intellectually confident woman who is yet lovable and entirely feminine.⁵²⁶ She certainly comes closer to fulfilling the criteria of the ideal woman than the unhappy domestic drudge. That Corelli even allows that housewives can be unhappy demonstrates just how near she comes to challenging domestic idealism. That her female protagonists are not all solely content to remain on their domestic pedestals illustrates the considerable extent to which her novels reshape this middle-class ideal.

⁵²⁴ Marie Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, Methuen, London, 1900, p. 171.

⁵²⁵ See, for example, Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan or The Strange Experience of One Geoffrey Tempest, Millionaire. A Romance*, Methuen, London, 1895, p. 230 and p. 246.

⁵²⁶ A woman who is just like Mavis Clare but who is married or who intends to marry represents Corelli's other model of ideal womanhood. See, for example, the character of Angela Sovrani in *The Master-Christian*.

However, her novels do not disappoint in mirroring the paradoxes, even blatant contradictions, inherent in a society that generally expresses a desire to protect traditional notions of gender idealism while also embracing a limited degree of social and moral change. With equal zeal to that portrayed in her rejection of housekeeping as a worthy occupation, Corelli launches herself into proving that ‘ideas of domestic virtue’ are not quite obsolete.⁵²⁷ She still idealises the young and innocent bride – the modest young woman who has not yet been sexually corrupted by the era’s popular New Woman fiction.⁵²⁸ Moreover, in *The Mighty Atom*, and with a gusto that seems blind to the risk she runs of contradicting her previously-expressed sentiments, Corelli contends that ‘throughout all creation, nature makes mother-love a law, and mother’s duty paramount’.⁵²⁹ The absoluteness of this statement is taken even further – any mother who does not take care of her children the way nature intended, and who instead passes them over to the care of nannies, should be sentenced to a term of imprisonment with hard labour.⁵³⁰ The views expressed in Corelli’s books to the effect that competently fulfilling the true womanly role of wife and mother is of the utmost importance often clashes directly with those that declare that there has to be a higher aim in a woman’s life than that of keeping house for a husband and family. This sense of ambiguity is heightened by her repeated assertions that New Women, those women who are seen ‘clamouring like unnatural hens in a barnyard about their ‘rights’ and ‘wrongs’’, rob the rest of their sex of its dignity – assertions that she makes while simultaneously campaigning for the well-deserved recognition of the female mind and of the substantial, even remarkable, intellectual capabilities of women in the often hostile environment of the male-dominated intellectual world.⁵³¹

⁵²⁷ This contradicts the claim made to this effect on the part of the decadently aristocratic Lady Sibyl in *The Sorrows of Satan*. (See Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, pp. 371-372.)

⁵²⁸ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 306.

⁵²⁹ Marie Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, Methuen, London, 1912 [1896], p. 150.

⁵³⁰ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 386.

⁵³¹ Look, for instance, at the character, Angela Sovrani, a painter of some genius in *The Master-Christian*, who finds that she continually has to prove herself to the men around her, including the clergy and even her fiancé; and at Mavis Clare, the highly successful writer in *The Sorrows of Satan* who finds not only her skills, but also her personality, consistently under attack, especially from male literary critics.

Furthermore, like many of her arguments, Corelli's ideas about domesticity are class-orientated. In the ideal world that her fiction promotes, women from the middle and upper strata of society are expected to subscribe to the moral and spiritual aspects of domesticity, but they are exempted from conforming to its strenuous physical demands. Working-class women, on the other hand, are not. Whereas, middle-class women are not encouraged to derive self-worth solely from the performance of domestic duties, working-class women are. The 'poor, simple Ibsen-less housemaid Lucy' in *The Mighty Atom* is certainly admired for her uncomplicated attitude towards the supreme importance of a woman's duty as a mother.⁵³² Moreover, any woman from this social class who rejects her role in the domestic realm is soon set back on the right track. In the same novel, for example, Susie, the daughter of the tea-room woman, has to learn of her rightful position in the household. Susie, readers are told, had been distracted by reading cheap novels and penny papers on butter-girls marrying lords, reading that had made her wish she was someone else. The result was that she often forgot her proper place and her duties - allowing the cream to spoil, dropping eggs on doorsteps and wearing inappropriate hairstyles for a girl in her position and pinching in her waist so that her nose went red. Natural order is only restored when, after a talk with her aunt, Susie corrects her ways - throws away her books and marries a decent farmer and has three children, which means that she certainly does not have time for any more books.⁵³³

While technological advancements are under way aiming at improving the ease with which domestic tasks are carried out - as Bennett's novels clearly show - they are certainly not at the point where they can replace the need for housekeepers and domestic servants. Although Corelli's novels tend to deal with dreams and ideals, they also address enough of a social reality to acknowledge this. Someone has to be responsible for what Corelli often regards as the lowly

⁵³² Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, p. 150.

⁵³³ Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, pp. 29-30.

occupation of housekeeping, and if this role is not considered ideal, or even fitting, for women of the middle and upper classes, then it naturally falls to the lot of their counterparts in the working classes.



The novels of both Bennett and Corelli illustrate that attitudes towards domesticity were not static at the turn of the twentieth century – that there was room for challenges to the importance given to this conventionally female occupation in the popular discourse of the era. However, taken together, they also confirm that the general consensus among the reading public at the beginning of the twentieth century was that the ‘proper’ place of women was in the domestic sphere. There were larger social shifts under way regarding the positions that were opening to women of the middle classes (as will be seen in the next chapter, paid employment was one such area experiencing movement of this kind). But, Bennett’s novels in particular indicate that these shifts had not yet filtered down to affect many individual women – except perhaps, as far as some technological improvements were concerned. As Edwin Clayhanger (*Clayhanger*) and Denry Machin (*The Card*) demonstrate, innovations such as hot running water and even the vacuum cleaner had managed to reach some in the provincial towns in the north of England. However, it stands that during this transitional era, not only did most middle-class women continue to find purpose within the privacy of the household, but also that in spite of the existence of challenges to the notion of separate spheres, numerous important aspects of domestic idealism continued to hold sway over the minds of the reading public.

Chapter 5

Employment and Careers

A vast majority of middle-class women assumed the expected role of housewife or housekeeper during the Late Victorian and Edwardian years.⁵³⁴ However, some forms of paid employment were gaining increasing acceptance as suitable occupations for women of this rank. While middle-class female employment was by no means a widespread phenomenon, it was an important topical issue and it did affect enough women during this period to warrant further discussion in this thesis.

There is an extensive amount of secondary material on nineteenth- and twentieth-century employment presently available to historians.⁵³⁵ For the most part, these publications concentrate on identifying the difficulties involved in ascertaining the extent of female involvement in paid work; on pinpointing the main areas of expansion; and on detailing the conditions affecting female employees. What is largely absent, however, are extensive insights into the individual thoughts and feelings of women in the workforce – insights for which there are few available sources.

Popular fiction of the era, such as that written by Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli, provides one possible pathway into this area of historical investigation. However, despite being a highly topical concern during the era, paid employment is not a major preoccupation of these novels – implying that only a relatively small number of ‘ordinary’ middle-class women applied themselves to the whole notion

⁵³⁴ See chapter 4 ‘The Business of Domesticity’ for a much more detailed discussion of middle-class women and housework.

⁵³⁵ See, for example, Lee Holcombe, *Victorian Ladies at Work. Middle Class Working Women in England and Wales 1850-1914*, David Charles, Newton Abbot, Devon, 1973; Jane Humphries, ‘Women and Paid Work’, in June Purvis (ed.), *Women’s History: Britain, 1850-1945. An Introduction*, UCL Press, London, 1995, pp. 85-106; David Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes. Women’s Emancipation in the 1890s*, Harvester Press, Brighton, Sussex, 1986; and Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society: England 1750-1880*, Blackwell, Oxford and Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993.

of job-seeking. Still, where these authors do discuss this issue, their observations and comments are extremely useful in helping to build a picture of turn-of-the-century attitudes towards women and their daily occupations.

Bennett's middlebrow novels, for example, aid historians in fleshing out what has already been written regarding the motivations and reactions of middle-class women entering into the sphere of employment – for this author's interests lie mainly in penetrating the thoughts and the feelings of his individual characters, including, if not especially, his female characters. Where Bennett does deal with his characters' reactions to this issue, he reveals a range of responses – from an intense need for a sense of purpose other than that derived from being a housekeeper to a preference for this traditionally accepted feminine role over that of a paid worker. Corelli's bestselling books, on the other hand, are less useful as insights into individual reactions, and more valuable for the observations they make concerning what she sees as the paradoxes existing between popular feminine idealism and the everyday reality of expanding employment opportunities for women from the middle classes. How does Corelli do this? For the most part, she manages to promote feminine ideals of service and duty, as well as lend support to ideas of female independence and self-worth, while managing to avoid more mundane or realistic details. Corelli depicts only women who either have the financial means to enable them to immerse themselves in an area of work that they love and for which they have natural talents, or women who have to earn an income but who possess similar natural skills. Importantly, the skills that Corelli's female protagonists possess are largely intuitive, requiring little formal education beyond the basics, such as literary and artistic abilities. Furthermore, these women tend to exercise their skills within strictly acceptable female environments, thereby avoiding commonly discussed issues such as workplace conditions, income levels, workplace relations and notions of respectability. Nor do Corelli's escapist novels deal with the topic of frustrated ambitions – unlike Bennett's fictional realism. All of her female protagonists are highly successful in their chosen area of employment. Of course, in line with popular turn-of-the-

century idealistic notions, moral power is considered to be of a higher importance to women than the power that stems from material or worldly success. Therefore, Corelli's audience is left in no doubt as to the fact that her main women characters aspire, above all else, to moral heights, even if they manage to achieve fame and fortune at the same time.



Middle-class female employment was an area of complex debate at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. It drew on discussions surrounding, among other things, guarded notions of feminine idealism and shifting social and economic conditions. It is generally agreed that the era's much discussed 'surplus' of women and the changing nature of industrial and commercial enterprises both created the demand for and helped to fulfil the supply of substantially well-educated, cheap labour. General attitudes gradually endorsed, or at least tolerated, certain strains of job expansion for women, but a great deal of tension concerning the proper role of women in turn-of-the-century society still remained – as evidenced in both the available secondary material and in the popular novels of the era.⁵³⁶

There are considerable difficulties involved in establishing exactly how many middle-class women were engaged in paid employment and in which positions they were employed during this period.⁵³⁷ It is not within the scope of this chapter, however, to attempt to resolve these statistical difficulties. Rather, the primary aim here is to explore the feelings of middle-class working women and those of the general reading public. But, in order to do so, a short introduction to

⁵³⁶ For broader, more detailed discussions of this 'surplus' of women and the social and economic shifts affecting Late Victorian and Edwardian society, see, for example, Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women*, New York University Press, New York, 1993; Jose Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914*, Penguin, London, 1994; and J. F. C. Harrison, *Late Victorian Britain 1875-1901*, Fontana Press, London, 1990.

⁵³⁷ See Pat Thane, 'Late Victorian Women', in T. R. Gourvish and Alan O'Day (eds.), *Later Victorian Britain 1867-1900*, Macmillan, Houndsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London, 1988, pp. 175-208, pp. 187-188; Humphries, pp. 85-86; and Rubinstein, p. 69.

the number of middle-class women involved and the main occupations affected by expansions to female employment is necessary.

According to David Rubinstein, the proportion of women employed in England varied little between 1871 and 1911. Over 25 per cent of the female population were in some form of paid employment and women composed about 30 per cent of the workforce – although both of these figures declined slightly towards the end of the century.⁵³⁸ Therefore, interest in women's employment in the 1890s, it seems, stems more from the changing distribution of this work, than from any dramatic increase in the numbers of women being employed.⁵³⁹ That is to say, greater numbers of middle-class women entered into the workforce – into more concentrated female places of work.⁵⁴⁰ The newly created or recently expanded areas of employment most suited to middle-class women included the Civil Service and commercial and financial industries requiring the use of the typewriter and shorthand, newly established and expanded education and health facilities, and sales environments – those catering for the increased demand for ready-made clothing and pre-packaged food.⁵⁴¹ One early twentieth-century commentator estimated in 1881 that 12.6 per cent of working women were employed in these middle-class occupations, whereas this figure had risen to 23.7 per cent by 1911.⁵⁴²

⁵³⁸ Rubinstein, p. 69.

⁵³⁹ Rubinstein, p. 69. See also Suzann Buckley, 'The Family and the Role of Women', in Alan O'Day (ed.), *The Edwardian Age: Conflict and Stability 1900-1914*, Macmillan, London and Basingstoke, 1979, pp. 133-143, p. 135. Buckley pays more attention to the small fluctuations in the percentage of employed women (that is, girls over ten years old). She reports that there was a decline, between 1891 and 1901, in the percentage of employed women in England, but that, by 1911 had experienced a slight reversal. In 1891 31.14 per cent were employed, which dropped to 29.1 per cent in 1901, before rising slightly to 29.7 per cent in 1911.

⁵⁴⁰ For example, in 1901, 54 per cent of these women were working in occupations where 80 per cent or more of the employees were female, although, by 1911 this figure stood at 50 per cent. (Jane E. Lewis, 'Women Clerical Workers in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,' in Gregory Anderson (ed.), *The White-Blouse Revolution. Female Office Workers Since 1870*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1988, pp. 27-47, p. 33.)

⁵⁴¹ Rubinstein, p. 71 and Buckley, p. 136.

⁵⁴² A.L. Bowley, *Wages and Income in the United Kingdom Since 1860*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1937, pp. 127-129, cited in Rubinstein, p. 70.

These recently developed areas of employment shared a couple of important characteristics that rendered them suitable for middle-class women. In the first place, they fitted the Victorian ideal in that the work involved was (fairly) ‘clean, light, respectable, carried out mainly among other women: heavy physical work and the moral dangers of mixing with large numbers of men were both excluded.’⁵⁴³ And, secondly, they required a reasonable level of education.⁵⁴⁴ Much of the demand for these new positions was only beginning to be heard by the 1880s, but by the early decades of the twentieth century their reputation as female dominated areas of work was largely assured.⁵⁴⁵ The teaching and nursing professions, for example, underwent a transformation at the end of the nineteenth century that made them increasingly suitable for middle-class women.⁵⁴⁶ By 1881, there were 122,846 female teachers recorded in the census, and increasingly these women were employed in the growing number of elementary schools.⁵⁴⁷ And as it became a trained profession, more and more upper-working and middle-class women entered into nursing. The number of nurses employed in England and Wales between 1861 and 1911 increased by 210.5 per cent – rising from a figure of 24,821 to 77,060.⁵⁴⁸ Female doctors, however, remained small in number throughout the Victorian and Edwardian years. This occupation differed from nursing in that it was an area of the medical profession that fiercely resisted any feminisation. Of 19,037 doctors in England and Wales in 1891, only 101 were women. This is not surprising considering conditions surrounding potential lady

⁵⁴³ Jane Rendall, p. 71.

⁵⁴⁴ Rendall, pp. 71-72.

⁵⁴⁵ Rendall, pp. 71-72.

⁵⁴⁶ Although the ‘low’ origins of nursing and the nature of the work involved in nursing continued to be somewhat problematic for those concerned with respectability. For more information, see Rendall, p. 76. See also Meta Zimmeck, ‘Jobs For The Girls: The Expansion of Clerical Work for Women, 1850-1914’ in Angela V. John (ed.), *Unequal Opportunities. Women’s Employment in England 1800-1918*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford and New York, 1986, pp. 153-177, p. 157.

⁵⁴⁷ Rendall writes that by 1875 just over half of elementary school teachers were women. By 1914, this figure had grown to three-quarters. (Rendall, p. 77.) See also Rubinstein, p. 77. For information on changes to concepts of teaching that rendered the position of the governess obsolete and that led to a more formalised profession, see Rendall, pp. 72-73; Perkin, p. 164; and Thane, p. 193.

⁵⁴⁸ See Table 2a, ‘Number of Nurses Employed in England and Wales, 1861-1911,’ and Table 2b, ‘Percentage of Increase in the Number of Nurses Employed in England and Wales, 1861-1911,’ in Holcombe, pp. 204-205. For further reading on the conditions of nursing, see also, Rendall, especially pp. 75-76; and Perkin, pp. 164-165.

doctors. Obstacles in their way included gruelling training, initial lack of money, continued hostility to medical women, a life of loneliness, fatigue, hardship, self-denial, indifference, professional jealousy and isolation. By 1901, after ten years of struggle, women still only numbered 212 out of 22,698 doctors. Male doctors faced many of the financial hardships of their female counterparts, but they also faced less social opposition and many could also count on the eventual support of a wife.⁵⁴⁹ A woman entering into the field of medicine, then, was expected to sustain a level of dedication that few other areas of acceptable middle-class female employment at this time demanded.

Shop and clerical work also underwent dramatic transformations at the turn of the twentieth century. Shops witnessed an influx of female workers from the 1870s onwards - as shopping, 'once a stern necessity', fast became a very popular pastime for the working and middle classes alike.⁵⁵⁰ By 1914, Holcombe claims, female shop assistants formed 'by far the largest single group of middle-class women workers in the country', numbering close to half a million.⁵⁵¹ This area of employment was increasingly deemed suitable for women, not only because an elementary education was a sufficient prerequisite, but also because women were only introduced into areas where little if any training was needed, where the level of wages were highly important to the dealer, and where the customers were mainly women - 'shops selling drapery, millinery, underwear, food, flowers or stationery and other goods.'⁵⁵²

⁵⁴⁹ Rubinstein, p. 80-81. Rubinstein comments, in support of this, that in England and Wales, in 1901, only 21 per cent of female doctors were either married or widowed. In reference to training and low income yields, for instance, Rubinstein points to the example of an 'eminent lady doctor', who wrote in 1895, that her five years of medical training cost her approximately £1,000, including fees and living expenses, and that this was followed by a year or two of poorly paid employment. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson agreed with this, saying, in 1897, that a young lady doctor would do well to earn £100 to £150 in the first year of general practice and so would initially need her father's financial assistance. Rubinstein, p. 80.

⁵⁵⁰ Holcombe, p. 106. There are no reliable sources available on the number of shop assistants employed during this period. Census figures are 'quite unsatisfactory' for most of the period between 1861 and 1911. Until the census of 1901, for example, no attempt was made to distinguish between shop dealers and shop assistants. For example, see Rendall, p. 77; and Holcombe, pp. 104-105.

⁵⁵¹ Holcombe, p. 103.

⁵⁵² Rendall, p. 77; and Holcombe, pp. 106-107.

Equally dramatic was the introduction of women into office work between 1850 and 1914. Indeed, by 1914, after shop assistants and teachers, women clerks had become ‘the most numerous and important group of middle-class working women in the country.’⁵⁵³ Clerical work had previously been dominated by men. But, with office development – for instance, with the use of the typewriter, telephone, telegraphy, dictating and adding machines, and new methods of filing and of retrieving data – clerical work became more suited to the growth of a cheaper, well-educated female workforce. This growing feminisation of office work has also been attributed to the increasingly routine nature of the work and to the subsequent lack of promotion opportunities. Women, Thane argues, ‘appropriated or were assigned such work where it was new, without a male tradition, and where it could be routinised and clearly separated from a career ladder.’⁵⁵⁴ It is likely, however, that the majority of female clerks rarely questioned the routine nature of their jobs or challenged the lack of promotional opportunities offered to them. The conditions that many of these women worked in were unpleasant, but the important thing was that the work was considered to be appropriate femininely.⁵⁵⁵ Moreover, despite the unpleasant conditions, there is no doubting that a majority

⁵⁵³ Holcombe, p. 141. There are differing estimations of the rise in the numbers of female clerks employed – all, however, support the argument that it was a dramatic increase. Holcombe calculates that women represented 0.3 per cent of the total number of clerks in 1861 and that this rose to 18.1 per cent in 1911 and then to 46.1 per cent in 1921. From Table 4a, ‘Number of Clerks Employed in England and Wales, 1861-1911’ in Holcombe, p. 210, and also Table 2.3, ‘Number of Clerks Employed, Male and Female, England and Wales, 1861-1981’ in Lewis, ‘Women Clerical Workers,’ p. 34. Zimmeck argues that that female clerks as a proportion of all clerks rose from 2 per cent in 1851 to 20 per cent in 1911 – that the number of males employed during this time multiplied by 7 (from 93,000 to 677,000), whereas the number of women clerks multiplied by 83 (from 2,000 to 166,000) (See Zimmeck, p. 154.) Jane Lewis provides similar evidence. Between 1871 and 1881 the participation rates of women from 15 to 24 years old ‘showed a general absolute increase and after 1881 women aged 20-34 increased their participation relative to men of the same age.’ (Lewis, ‘Women Clerical Workers,’ p. 32.)

⁵⁵⁴ Thane, p. 192. See also Zimmeck, p. 154; Rubinstein, p. 72; Holcombe, pp. 142-148; and Rendall, p. 77. Rendall also refers to the argument that the typewriter, sold widely from 1882, required skills that were frequently compared to those required for playing the piano – further cementing the use of this piece of office equipment as appropriately feminine. However, even clerical work pointed to the existence of discrepancies between the feminine ideal and the reality of the job. As Perkin argues, ‘Although clerical work was considered ‘genteel’, requiring a degree of literacy and a formality of dress associated with professional life, working conditions were often unpleasant. Women worked as long as twelve hours a day in poorly ventilated, dirty rooms with inadequate toilet facilities.’ (Perkin, pp. 166-167.)

⁵⁵⁵ For example, see Lewis, ‘Women Clerical Workers’, p. 32 and p. 36.

of female clerks took great pride in their work. But this pride did not necessarily motivate them to agitate for higher wages, for example.⁵⁵⁶ Rather, Zimmeck argues that the fact that most of the women who entered into the clerical profession during this era were inspired by ‘an enormous zest for life and adventure’ and that they were aware of their position as pioneers, persuaded many of them to regard these inadequate conditions and the existence of absurd restraints with ‘good-natured’ indignation.⁵⁵⁷

Money was not the only consideration motivating women to seek employment – although, of course, income – whether sole or supplementary – was an enormously influential factor for a number of middle-class women. The well-publicised ‘surplus’ of women, the increasing trend of marrying later in life, the fact that a small but important proportion of middle-class women were choosing to remain single rather than enter into unsatisfying marriages, and the aim of seeking the high degree of independence and self-respect that stems from achieving financial self-sufficiency, all help to explain why a growing number of women from this social stratum saw fit to engage in paid work.⁵⁵⁸ Whatever the reason for entering into the workforce, the fact remained that economic hardship and social marginality continued to burden a large proportion of single middle-class women who had neither the independent financial means nor the financial support of a family to help them to survive. Furthermore, in spite of the many developments in the sphere of female employment, women continued to be subject to strict nineteenth-century notions of feminine idealism. Single women were expected to be self-sacrificing above all else. There were more alternatives available to them at the end of the century than there were earlier when unmarried daughters and

⁵⁵⁶ Lewis, ‘Women Clerical Workers,’ p. 42; and Zimmeck, p. 166. Holcombe discusses the direction and results of union campaigns to improve office conditions and wages in Holcombe, pp. 157-162.

⁵⁵⁷ Zimmeck, p. 164.

⁵⁵⁸ Unfortunately, this chapter does not have the space to go into detail on the fate of the nineteenth-century ‘spinster’. For more information, see, for example, Perkin, *Victorian Women*; Pat Thane’s article, ‘Late Victorian Women’; and Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women. Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1985. For a specific discussion of feminist concerns with middle-class female employment, see Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism 1850-1900*, Hutchinson, London, 1987.

sisters were expected to stay at home and assume the unpaid position of aide to sick or aging relatives, but ‘the submission of self, voluntary labor, and a minimum of mobility outside the family circle’ continued to be much revered objectives.⁵⁵⁹ The contradictions between the nature of these ideals and the fact that they were antithetical to the more liberal values of society at large, such as ‘both physical and social mobility, individual development and hard work’, helped to create an environment that made change possible.⁵⁶⁰ And, far from conforming to the stereotypical image of the ‘passive’, leisurely, or ‘redundant’ female of the Victorian era, middle-class women, whether immersed in the domestic sphere or in the more public realm of employment, continued to contribute to

The strong sense of social responsibility, purpose and commitment to hard work with which all Victorians of all classes and both sexes were socialised.⁵⁶¹



Arnold Bennett’s novels present a variety of plausible reasons for middle-class women to engage in employment. In the first place, a large number of these women work because of financial need. However, his novels do not interest themselves much with the details of the lives of women who are motivated to seek work for this end. For the most part, Bennett’s portraits of needy women are confined to those of marginal spinsters – on the periphery of his stories as well as of society. This treatment likely implies one of two things – either that the general reading public is not enthused with the prospect of exploring the lives of financially needy women, that these often tragically portrayed women do not make good fictional material, or that images of middle-class women being forced to seek an income independent of that provided by their families is not as common a sight

⁵⁵⁹ Perkin, pp. 159-160. Perkin adds that some women found usefulness and a firm measure of responsibility in performing this role, whereas others experienced only a feeling of suffocation – of being trapped. See also Vicinus, pp. 4-5.

⁵⁶⁰ Vicinus, pp. 4-5.

⁵⁶¹ Thane, p. 176.

as to warrant extensive discussion. Helen Rathbone (*Helen with the High Hand*) is one of Bennett's few female protagonists who work for the sole purpose of gaining an income. However, quite tellingly, Bennett handles Helen in a sympathetically humorous manner – for readers are told that Helen works as a teacher mainly in order to top up her existing income because of an obsession with fashionable clothing. She is not in desperate financial need. However, this does not reduce the importance of Bennett's comments concerning Helen's attitudes towards employment. Rather these observations combine with those made in many of his other novels to help historians gain access to popular opinions about women and paid work.

Secondly, and in a category distinctly removed from that of financial need, is the motivating factor of finding some purposeful way of filling one's time. Bennett finds much more fictional substance in examples of this kind. He delves into the lives of women motivated by this desire more deeply than he does into those obliged by financial need. For instance, Sophia Baines (*The Old Wives' Tale*) begins her apprenticeship as a teacher because of an intense desire 'to do' something – other than work in the family shop, an occupation she despises. Hilda Lessways (*Hilda Lessways*), motivated by an absolute hatred of the 'ridiculous' business of domesticity, trains in shorthand and takes up a position as a clerk in a local newspaper. What unites the experiences of these two headstrong protagonists is, firstly, the desire for adventure, for life experiences outside the home and the familial environment and secondly, available opportunity. Neither Sophia nor Hilda specifically seek out teaching and clerical work, but training and employment opportunities come their way. Bennett, therefore, implies that it is not the actual nature of these separate vocations that motivates these women to engage in them, but rather it is their dreams of escape from the source of their present frustration and of broadening the scope of their existence coinciding with opportunity. Finding something meaningful 'to do' takes precedence over a career *per se*.

The third reason that Bennett outlines for women engaging in paid employment – one that is presented as even more exceptional in his novels – is that of dedication to a specific career. Rose Stanway (*Leonora*), who undertakes Matriculation examinations and then undergoes intense medical training, is one of this middlebrow author's rare examples of a middle-class woman who is driven by career ambition rather than by the income incentive or by the need to fulfil a sense of individual purpose. What distinguishes Rose's experiences from those of Hilda and Sophia is that whereas there is every indication that Rose's life is completely dedicated to pursuing a medical career, Hilda's and Sophia's experiences are only short-lived – with the more conventional path of marriage eventually replacing that of employment. A medical vocation, whether as a doctor or as a nurse, Bennett makes clear, requires an enormous degree of training and dedication – that fitting for a long-term career. Teaching, and perhaps even clerical work, demands less training (with the levels of commitment indubitably varying from individual to individual), thereby rendering them suitable for women who want to work only until marriage or who are forced to give up this employment because of marriage bars.⁵⁶² Bennett, for example, uses James Ollerenshaw (*Helen with the High Hand*) as a vehicle for exposing the absence of a career-minded approach to employment on the part of his niece, Helen, who is a teacher:

You must be the same as them hospital nurses.... You do it because ye like it – for love on it, as they say.⁵⁶³

Helen's reply firmly rebukes this notion:

Like it! I hate it. I hate any sort of work.⁵⁶⁴

Far from being dedicated to teaching, as Rose Stanway is to medicine, Helen, rather comically, is devoted to fashion and to extravagance. She is just one of many far from extraordinary middle-class women working as elementary teachers

⁵⁶² For more on attitudes towards the marriage bar, for example, see Lewis, 'Women Clerical Workers', especially p. 42.

⁵⁶³ Arnold Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, Alan Sutton, Gloucester, 1983 [1910], p. 19.

⁵⁶⁴ Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, p. 19.

in order to help earn a living or to maintain the standard of living with which they are familiar.⁵⁶⁵

Along with portraying a range of reasons for working, Bennett's novels also depict a number of reactions once a position of employment has been secured. His books support the notion that circumstances governing attitudes towards female employment have undergone a degree of transformation during the latter half of the nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth centuries. Working prior to marriage, his fiction argues, is more acceptable in the Edwardian period than it was in the Victorian. But he does not imply that popular attitudes are either enthusiastic or uniform. Middle-class women in his books experience a diverse range of emotions – from detesting work to deriving overwhelming feelings of satisfaction and self-worth from it. However, in all of these stories patterns are discernible from which a number of conclusions can be drawn, which helps historians to throw light on the opinions of the general reading public regarding this highly topical issue.

In the first place, even the more ambitious or unconventional of Bennett's female characters acknowledge that they are intruding in the male realm of employment and so accept that their experiences there are likely to be short-lived. Indeed, Bennett implies that for some women, far from being naïve about the *status quo*, the knowledge that this public domain is mostly closed to females represents a major motivating factor in seeking to enter it. Searching for a sense of adventure and for exceptional experiences, for example, is the main reason why Bennett's

⁵⁶⁵ Bennett emphasises the ordinariness of elementary school teachers. With the use of irony, he points out that such accomplished women or 'marvels' are to be seen in the streets in the morning and again in the evening – 'marvels' that only the School Boards or Education Committees know anything about. (See Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, p. 19. This passage is also quoted in chapter 3 'Learning for Life', p. 100.). Only in one brief incident does Bennett refer to the level of dedication to be found in the teaching profession – and this is on the part of the elder Miss Chetwynd who readers are told runs a girls' school in London (sister of Constance and Sophia's teacher in *The Old Wives' Tale*). The former spinster's new husband, Reverend Archibald Jones, is so equally devoted to the cause of education that he would not dream of allowing Miss Chetwynd to give up her vocation on marrying, never mind expecting it. (Arnold Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, Edinburgh, n.d. [1908], p. 66.) Obviously the ambitions of this serious-minded, dedicated woman are far removed from the more frivolous concerns of the much more conventional Helen.

‘new woman’, Hilda Lessways, enters into office work. For Hilda, clerical work provides an escape from the typical female domestic responsibilities. It offers her a chance to achieve a degree of freedom and sense of purpose comparable to that common among male experience. Hilda’s thoughts about her place in society and about her career prospects illustrate that, as one of Bennett’s more ambitious and more articulate characters, she is very much aware of the existence of separate spheres, and knows that there are ways of breaching this division, but is also equally aware of the fact that she cannot permanently escape from the kind of life that her society maps out for women of her class.

Hilda views the whole business of domesticity as ridiculously wasteful of women’s intellectual skills.⁵⁶⁶ She considers life within the confines of the home to be suffocating. Instead, she desires adventure and challenge outside the realm of conventional female existence.⁵⁶⁷ Clerical training and securing a job in the local newspaper office afford her the opportunity to fulfil both of these desires. Not only does she enjoy being considered useful – to the point that any hint from her employer that she is in any way dispensable, that she might not be needed for every step of the newspaper’s creation, wounds her ego – but, and in spite of Bennett’s ironic tone, it is also made clear that Hilda gains experiences beyond the reach of most of the women with whom she comes into contact:

She was a pioneer. No young woman had ever done what she was doing. She was the only girl in the Five Towns who knew shorthand.⁵⁶⁸

This New Woman character, like many of the era’s female clerks, is aware that her experiences are far removed from those of their male counterparts.⁵⁶⁹ She does

⁵⁶⁶ See previous chapter ‘The Business of Domesticity’, for more discussion.

⁵⁶⁷ See, for example, Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1976 [1911], pp. 58-59. Just visiting the local solicitor’s office to inquire about the details of her father’s will is an excursion that provides an enormous sense of ‘adventure’ in Hilda’s mind. (See Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 32.)

⁵⁶⁸ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 60 and see also p. 87.

⁵⁶⁹ Zimmeck claims that female clerks were enthusiastic, though not naive. They were very aware of the position they occupied on the employment, and social, scene – they understood clearly that as long as they worked in this environment they were governed by constraints that were not applied to men, and that their overall position was inferior. She adds that although some women keenly

not want equality as such, but she does envy many of what she perceives to be male advantages. She envies the relative freedom of men and their sense of superiority. She has ‘money, freedom and ambition’, all of which she regards as typically male. However, being a woman, she initially lacks the knowledge that would enable her to make the most of these advantages.⁵⁷⁰ Only George Cannon’s professional knowledge and friendly encouragement helps her to access the training for the experiences that she so desperately craves.

Working in an office not only removes Hilda from having to perform everyday female tasks, usually those associated with the home and with housework, but it also allows her to temporarily avoid other typical female responsibilities, including her social and filial duties. Her position excuses her, for example, from accompanying her mother to London. Her mother’s absence at home, then, enables her to leave work when she pleases, to take work home with her, and to apply herself to it over dinner. Such deviations from usual practice produce a sense of exhilaration – one that she had never before experienced:

She was alone, free; and she tasted her freedom to the point
of ecstasy.⁵⁷¹

Zimmeck supports this notion of freedom. Female clerks, she argues, saw ‘the typewriter, the ledger, and the shorthand writer’s pad’ not as tools of ‘oppression’, but rather as instruments of ‘liberation’.⁵⁷² However, Bennett’s fiction goes further than Zimmeck’s article in that it offers more insights into the positive feelings, as well as the personal costs, even the agonies, that can accompany this sense of freedom.

felt the inferiority of their position to the point of doing something about it – from attempting to reform to playing the system for all it was worth – for the most part, ‘Within the boundaries of the women’s sphere most women clerks attempted to make the best of a bad deal.’ (Zimmeck, p. 165.)

⁵⁷⁰ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 256.

⁵⁷¹ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 89.

⁵⁷² In reference to the responsibilities of office employment in the minds of female clerks, Zimmeck claims: ‘They felt in themselves the power to do something productive and meaningful and real – to plunge into the hurly-burly of the world hitherto monopolized by men, to become, in the words of Gissing’s Miss Barfoot, proprietor of a typewriting school and agency, ‘*rational and responsible human beings*,’ to work’. (Zimmeck, p. 165.)

Hilda's clerical responsibilities allow her to deviate from the image of the ideal middle-class woman in another sense – in a moral sense. Hilda initially discovers that her conscience does not sit well with the loose morality inherent in the murky world of journalism. She finds that she actively has to adjust her mindset to accustom herself to the everyday promotion of 'lies'. She shows ideal womanly feeling in that she blushes when copying out information that she knows to be false. However, she strives to abandon this aspect of her feminine outlook. She even feels angry at the fact that her conscience takes offence. In her mind there exists something of a battle between duty to instilled moral values and duty to her new position and her new world of enlarged experiences. Her sense of duty to her new life begins to win her over – accepting this new code of morality becomes a sure sign that she is really becoming part of this coveted male world. Learning to overcome her feelings of feminine delicacy and accepting this 'wickedness' produces a strong sense of pride.⁵⁷³

However, Hilda soon finds out that she cannot drown out her conscience's objections against her lapses in filial duty as easily as it can those against telling professional untruths. At a pivotal point in the novel, Hilda makes the decision to temporarily give precedence to her duty to her job over that to her mother. Instead of rushing to London to her sick mother's bedside, she delays – in favour of finishing her work. Her desire to be professionally useful overrides that to be of comfort to her family. As a consequence, she is absent when Mrs Lessways dies. Her feelings of guilt and her resulting nervous breakdown effectively end any hopes of furthering her career as a clerical assistant and instead mark the beginning of a new life trapped within the confines of a series of boarding houses. What this example reveals is that however much Hilda rails against female sentimentality, there are aspects of it from which she, as an Edwardian middle-class female, cannot escape.⁵⁷⁴ Her society offers her the means by which to temporarily flee an outwardly conventional female existence. But it does not

⁵⁷³ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, pp. 99-101.

endorse any more self-indulgent or selfish forms of liberty, for instance, that which allows women to shrug off their primary duty of care to their families. Turn-of-the-century society, Bennett's novels argue, certainly does not support individual female ambitions above traditional notions of familial and social obligations.

The fact that this theme is also referred to in *The Old Wives' Tale* demonstrates that it is a topical concern of the period. However, its significance or popularity is not to be overrated. A lapse in filial duty is Sophia's declared reason for abandoning her teacher training. In flirting with Gerald Scales in the family shop, Sophia neglects her invalid father who falls out of bed with fatal consequences. Her resolve then is to give up that which she most desires – her career aspirations. However, it soon comes to light that Sophia's real reason for resuming her place in the family shop is not as much as an act of penance but rather as a way of providing herself with an opportunity of seeing Scales again. Romance firmly supplants employment prospects. However, relinquishing a career to compensate for a lapse in filial duty is a much more noble sacrifice to Sophia's young, romantic and passionate mind than relinquishing it for the more conventional motive of seeking a husband. But, the link between disdain for selfish ambition and the promotion of familial responsibilities, in the fear that the former will detract from the latter, is certainly not overplayed in this instance. If anything, Sophia's example produces something of a humorous comment on it all. However, the very fact of this connection being drawn on, no matter how slight the manner, illustrates the existence of a conflict between ideals of femininity and shifts regarding female employment in the minds of the general reading public.⁵⁷⁵

So, the effects of Victorian ideals of femininity on the lives of 'ordinary' middle-class women are very much in evidence in Bennett's fictional realism, even if they are not explored in the extravagant manner that they are in Corelli's didactically escapist stories. In the moral and social climate of her contemporary society, for example, Hilda Lessways cannot be allowed to continue on the path on which she

⁵⁷⁴ For an example of Hilda's attitude towards female sentimentality, see Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 21.

has started. Her life and her interests become too focused on herself and on her job. Her daily tasks are – to be realistic – quite basic, quite narrow, but they are enough to consume her full attention, as her failure to perform her duty to her mother illustrates.⁵⁷⁶

Save for her desire to perfect herself in her duties, she had no desire. She was content. In this dismal, dirty, untidy, untidiable, uncomfortable office, arctic near the windows, and tropic near the stove, with dust on her dress and ink on her fingers and the fumes of gas in her quivering nostrils, and her mind strained and racked by an exaggerated sense of her own responsibilities, she was in heaven! She who so vehemently objected to the squalid mess of the business of domesticity, revelled in the squalid mess of this business. She whose heart would revolt because Florrie's work was never done, was delighted to wait all hours on the convenience of men who seemed to be the very incarnation of incalculable change and caprice. And what was she? Nothing but a clerk, at a commencing salary of fifteen shillings per week! Ah! But she was a priestess! She had a vocation which was unsoiled by the economic excuse.⁵⁷⁷

Hilda has a private income. She does not need to work – which only reinforces the notion that her decision to work is based solely on pleasing herself and her ambitions. Choosing marriage, choosing the conventional lot of wife, further cements the end of her dreams – ‘an enlarged liberty, of wide interests, and of original activities – such as no woman to her knowledge had ever had’.⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷⁵ See Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 94.

⁵⁷⁶ Bennett explains: ‘Her sole interest – but it was tremendous! – lay in what she herself had to do – namely, take down from dictation, transcribe, copy, classify, and keep letters and documents, and occasionally correct proofs. All beyond this was misty for her, and she never adjusted her sight in order to pierce the mist.’ (Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 60.)

⁵⁷⁷ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 60.

⁵⁷⁸ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, pp. 255-256.

Significantly, career ambitions never succeed in supplanting marital aspirations in Hilda's mind – not because she is completely disposed to be married (although this is the only acceptable way of satisfying her sexual desires), but because she believes that her greatest hope of holding a degree of social power lies in being a wife. In thoughts reminiscent of mid-Victorian domestic idealism, Hilda allows herself to dream of future domestic bliss with Edwin Clayhanger, but only if he becomes an influential, highly respected man of the town and if she can wield some power and influence behind the scenes.⁵⁷⁹ Moreover, the promise of becoming the influential wife behind the successful public husband is one of the most important motivating factors influencing her decision to marry George Cannon.⁵⁸⁰ Her disastrous marriage to Cannon, however, only serves to further consolidate her feelings of frustration and of disappointment at relinquishing her job as a clerk and of once again resuming the relatively closed, almost suffocating world of conventional middle-class female existence.

There is never much of a retrospective analysis of the effect on Sophia Baines who, as has been seen, trades career ambitions for a disastrous marriage in a more direct manner than Hilda. Sophia chooses the possibility of securing romantic adventure and love over completing her training as a teacher. Her example lends further support to the Victorian and Edwardian belief that paid employment was incompatible with the traditional roles of wife and mother – and that it was therefore only to be thought of as a time-filler before marriage.⁵⁸¹ After the collapse of her marriage to the irresponsible and extravagant Scales, Sophia adopts the position of manager of a boarding house but, unlike Hilda, she makes an enormous success of this business.⁵⁸² However, there is a distinctive difference between Hilda and Sophia's reasons for attempting to pursue their respective

⁵⁷⁹ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 137.

⁵⁸⁰ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 235.

⁵⁸¹ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, pp. 94-95.

⁵⁸² After her marriage to the bigamist, Cannon, is dissolved, Hilda discovers that she is pregnant. She runs his Brighton boarding house in order to provide for herself and her son. But when Edwin Clayhanger rediscovers her almost a decade later, her business is nearing financial ruin. (For example, see Arnold Bennett, *Clayhanger*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1975 [1910], pp. 453-461.)

careers. Both are inspired by the need to do something with their lives. But whereas Sophia is simply motivated by the need ‘to *do*’ something other than work in the detested shop, Hilda is pushed on by more forceful feelings – by a fierce yearning for adventure, for a life completely removed from that of conventional female existence. Sophia is certainly more unconventional than her homely sister, Constance. But the height of her ambitions does not reach that of Bennett’s ‘new woman’, Hilda. As has been said, initially neither woman seems expressly interested in teaching or in clerical work as such, but the relative lack of concern that Sophia displays for abandoning her resolve to be a teacher demonstrates that her ambitions align more readily with those of the bulk of ‘ordinary’ middle-class women – more so than with Hilda.

Certainly, not all women appreciated the opportunity to take part in typical male affairs, however. Indeed, contrary to the thoughts and feelings of the quite exceptional ‘new woman’, Hilda Lessways, a number of Bennett’s female characters exhibit signs of frustration and even of anger at having to intrude into this dominantly male area of activity – whether into employment itself or into business-related concerns. A number of Bennett’s novels demonstrate a concern for protecting existing notions of separate spheres. Ethel Stanway and her mother, Leonora (*Leonora*), Anna Tellwright (*Anna of the Five Towns*) and Helen Rathbone (*Helen with the High Hand*) all illustrate varying degrees of antagonism towards being forced to confront issues not deemed to belong in the typically feminine realm.

Helen Rathbone hates teaching, however, she is proud of her accomplishments – accomplishments that include mathematics, sewing and cooking. But she would rather exercise these skills in the domestic sphere than in educational institutions.⁵⁸³ At the first opportunity, then, she throws in her teaching post in order to take up the position of housekeeper for her elderly uncle.

⁵⁸³ Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, p. 19.

Similarly, Ethel Stanway eagerly desires to give up working in her father's office in order to assume her 'natural' place in the home. Ethel is forced to participate in this male domain because her father decides to put his 'bone-idle' girls to work – Ethel in the office and Milly in the house helping her mother.⁵⁸⁴ The experiment is doomed from the beginning for, as Leonora observes, Ethel has a talent for housekeeping, and Milly certainly does not.⁵⁸⁵ After working only twelve days in the office, Ethel falls ill, which terminates her employment experiences.⁵⁸⁶

Ethel is severely displaced in the male dominated working environment. In Bennett's words, 'she looked like a violet roughly transplanted and bidden to blossom in the mire'.⁵⁸⁷ Every detail of the office repels her. And amid those surroundings, Ethel knew that 'she could be nothing but incapable, dull, stupid, futile, and plain'.⁵⁸⁸ In fact, the only time that she does feel in any way at home in this environment, is when she modestly objects to her father's proposal that she learn typing and shorthand in the presence of one of his business associates, Arthur Twemlow. Twemlow smiles sympathetically at Ethel's feminine modesty. Only then does she feel like herself again – as a woman being admired and being treated in a protective way by a man.⁵⁸⁹

Ethel's upbringing does not prepare her for this role. She may not love housework, but she certainly feels more comfortable and more competent when performing chores of this domestic nature.⁵⁹⁰ Ethel is too conventionally feminine – physically and mentally – to fit into this particular male place of work. Furthermore, being forced to leave the familiarity of her home angers her: 'She felt that she was being outrageously deprived of a natural right, hitherto enjoyed

⁵⁸⁴ Arnold Bennett, *Leonora*. A Novel, Books for Libraries Press, Plainview, New York, 1975 [1903], p. 20.

⁵⁸⁵ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 20.

⁵⁸⁶ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 140.

⁵⁸⁷ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 87.

⁵⁸⁸ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 87.

⁵⁸⁹ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 91.

⁵⁹⁰ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 88 and p. 96.

without let, to have the golden fruits of labour brought to her in discreet silence as to their origin.’⁵⁹¹ She does not want to know the origins of the family income, and she never expected that she would have to know. Moreover, intimacy with the seemingly important work being carried out within the male world of business and the knowledge of her own ignorance in relation to the workings of this realm makes her feel worthless and inadequate. She feels that experience here serves to drive a chasm between her life and that of her sisters. For listening to business discussions weighs heavily on her – as if she, alone among women, was being burdened by a knowledge of the world. Unlike Hilda, Ethel does not seek to be distinguished from the majority of her sex. She likes the sense of belonging – the lack of distinction from other young women of her class. She does not want to be different – she does not desire to experience anything different from her peers. All that this employment experience leaves her with is a feeling of shame concerning the ‘triviality’ of her own life – against the seeming ‘splendidly masculine, important, self-sufficient’ lives of businessmen.⁵⁹² None of these feelings are welcome because all Ethel wants is to remain secure within the familiar confines of the domestic environment – and a life immersed in this environment certainly does not serve to prepare her for, or equip her to deal with, the demands of her father’s world.

And Ethel is not alone. Her mother experiences similar concerns. Unlike Hilda Lessways, Leonora loathes the sense of moral challenge that tends to accompany participation in public or business matters. She too experiences feelings of anger, for her sake and for Ethel’s, at having to become acquainted with John Stanway’s financial concerns.⁵⁹³

And she was intimately conscious of a soilure, a moral stain, as the result of her recent contacts with the man of business in her husband. Why had she not been able to

⁵⁹¹ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 88.

⁵⁹² Bennett, *Leonora*, pp. 91-92.

⁵⁹³ Leonora’s husband informs her of the family’s financial strife and nominally asks her permission to re-mortgage her family home in order to save themselves.

keep femininely aloof from those puzzling and repellent matters, ignorant of them, innocent of them? And Ethel, too!⁵⁹⁴

Traditional middle-class moral ideals relating to femininity, then, are shown to have been very much alive in the society in which the book was produced. Anna Tellwright's concern with such matters is slightly less centred on morality than Leonora's – only slightly because moral anxiety shares the stage with practical considerations about handling financial transactions. Anna is thrown into the male world of business in a much more forceful manner than that experienced by Leonora. When she comes of age, her father informs her that she has inherited a large sum of money from her mother - £18,000 that he has invested on her behalf and which now totals £48,000, producing an annual income of £3,290.⁵⁹⁵ Anna has more than enough of an income to be financially independent, but she is not. Her relationship with her controlling father complicates matters greatly. In actuality, she is in her 'father's hands'.⁵⁹⁶

In theory, her father passes control of her money over to Anna. She is thrown into unfamiliar activities, including organising bank account details, debt-collecting, and simply thinking and worrying about money-related concerns. Financial talk is above her. The bank manager explains the use of her three new bank books and, although he 'had expounded them severally to her in simple language', she still leaves with a sense of vagueness and confusion.⁵⁹⁷ It is not that Anna is incapable of understanding – she is in no way stupid – but she is untrained in financial matters. The idea of controlling her own money, even a minute portion of it, scares and overwhelms her. In fact, Anna never feels that she has any real control over any of her money. So unfamiliar is she with the whole concept of money that it does not seem real to her – rather she feels as if 'she was merely a fixed point

⁵⁹⁴ Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 140.

⁵⁹⁵ Arnold Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, Wordsworth Classics, Hertfordshire, 1994 [1902], p. 23.

⁵⁹⁶ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 92.

⁵⁹⁷ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 27.

through which money that she was unable to arrest passed with the rapidity of trains'.⁵⁹⁸

Even more disturbing is the thought and, of course, the practice of collecting debts owed to her, for in this lies the moral challenge. Two men, Mr Price and his son, Willie, effectively commit suicide over the debts that they owe to Anna – or rather to her miserly father. The stress and the high degree of personal pain brought on by the Price affair – the pain both to Anna and to the Prices themselves – make her desire, more than anything, to be able to relinquish all control and indeed all knowledge of her financial dealings. One of the first things she decides to do when her marriage to the up and coming businessman, Henry Mynors, is settled, is to inform him that she plans to pass complete control over to him.⁵⁹⁹ Anna's overall desire is to live in contentment and in relative comfort, and she knows that this cannot be achieved while her lack of knowledge about financial matters causes her anxiety or represents a burden in any way – practically or morally.

The notion of feminine morality, of innocence and unworldliness, was not simply an ideal, one that was relegated to the realm of theory and idealism. Rather, as Bennett intimates in these examples, it was an admitted expectation. A small number of women, of which Hilda Lessways is one, craved worldly knowledge and experience, but more preferred to live within the realm for which they were trained, and to which they were, for the most part, bound. Not many women, Bennett's fiction argues, greatly desired knowledge of worldly responsibilities – not necessarily because of an idealistic belief in the notion of separate spheres, but quite simply because, unlike men of their class, they were ill-equipped to deal with concerns of this nature.

Lifelong commitment to matters existing outside the private sphere, then, was not common among Late Victorian and Edwardian women of the middle classes.

⁵⁹⁸ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 33. For example, even 'the effective possession of five pounds seems far too audacious a dream'. (See Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 76.)

Dedication to a career, for example, to the exclusion of all else was extremely rare – both in Bennett’s novels and in turn-of-the-century society itself. Rose Stanway, ‘an impassioned student of obstetrics’, then, represents one of Bennett’s exceptional models of womanhood. What is important to note here is that this popular middlebrow author does not depict employment experiences that have not already been accepted by Late Victorian and Edwardian society – at least to some degree. From teaching and shop work to the clerical and medical professions, all these forms of paid work have gained varying levels of endorsement by the general public.⁶⁰⁰ No matter how unusual they are, then, none of Bennett’s characters, Hilda Lessways and Rose Stanway included, are portrayed as being unacceptably radical for the contemporary reading public.

What strikes the reader as significant about Bennett’s depiction of Rose’s unusual career and her determined character is his unromantic, realistic treatment. His numerous commentaries on this medical student illustrate for historians that, far from being rejected or ridiculed, such devoted women were likely to have drawn admiration and awe. However, this admiration is not the same as that reserved for conventional femininity – that is to say, there is a definite shared understanding that these women are very different. And in some instances they are presented as somewhat asexual. Without the typical trappings of femininity to mark them, they almost seem unsexed. However, and again importantly for historians of this era, Bennett’s popular books do not rob them of their right to femininity in the same critical and attacking manner that Marie Corelli uses to unsex women involved in pursuing careers that she does not condone as femininely acceptable. In saying this, there is little doubt that women like Rose, and like the visiting nurse who briefly captures the attention of Richard Larch in *A Man From the North*, are portrayed in a less sympathetic manner than that used for most of Bennett’s female protagonists – a factor that indubitably renders them less attractive to the other

⁵⁹⁹ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 170.

⁶⁰⁰ As has been seen, Sophia and Constance Baines work in their parents’ shop in *The Old Wives’ Tale*. However, there is also Laura Roberts, the ‘ordinary’ suburban woman that Richard Larch

characters around them and presumably to the audience. But they are not treated with any amount of disrespect, as is the case in Corelli's bestselling fiction. A sense of threat, a feeling that these women represent a challenge to ideal notions of femininity is not altogether absent from Bennett's books, but this is largely to be accessed through the occasional thoughts of a small number of individual characters rather than through the direct authorial voice. Therefore, while it can be argued that a tone of fear or of hostility towards these women does not pervade his fiction, it cannot be said that evidence of tension existing between incoming change and the social and moral *status quo* is absent.

Rose Stanway is not a typical female character. She is segregated from the other girls of her class by virtue of her personality and her drive. Like the nurse in *A Man From the North*, Rose is self-possessed and confident about her own skills and abilities. She is not plagued by indecisiveness – she knows what she wants to do in life. Moreover, she possesses the skills and the personality traits required for the medical profession – a high level of organisation, competency, a willingness to work hard and for long hours, a solid sense of devotion and a firm degree of emotional detachment, a sense of detachment that is often viewed as a cold lack of compassion by those with whom Rose comes into contact.⁶⁰¹

Bennett's few examples support the idea that competent career women tend to instil a feeling of discomfort, even of inadequacy, in those around them, men or women. Richard Larch provides a good illustration of this. Before moving from the provinces to London to take up clerical work, he states that one of his greatest

marries in *A Man From the North*, who works as a cashier in a number of London cafes. (Arnold Bennett, *A Man From the North*, Hamish Hamilton Library, London, 1973 [1898].)

⁶⁰¹ Rose's mother, Leonora, for example, finds that she has no idea how to handle being 'challenged by an individuality at once so harsh and so impassioned'. (Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 140.) Leonora also witnesses Rose's manner at the bedside of her dying uncle and reports that her daughter had 'an irritating air of being perfectly equal to the occasion'. (Bennett, *Leonora*, p. 228.) Richard Larch considers the visiting nurse with whom he briefly comes into contact as being both 'strong' and 'brusque'. (Bennett, *A Man From the North*, p. 108.) Furthermore, he cannot understand how she could remain 'unmoved and cheerful in the midst of this piteous altercation with death. Was she blind to the terror in the man's eyes?' (Bennett, *A Man From the North*, p. 98.)

desires is to meet and fall in love with an unusual woman – a strong-minded, independent and irreligious woman – someone along the lines of the New Woman. The reality, he finds, does not conform to his previous visions. The nurse he meets, the only woman he has personal contact with who meets this criterion, confronts him and confuses him.⁶⁰² She challenges his preconceptions. And, most importantly for Richard, she intimidates him by conjuring feelings of inadequacy within him:

Hitherto he had only read about such women, and had questioned if they really existed. He grew humble before her, recognising a stronger spirit. Yet her self-reliance somehow chafed him, and he directed his thoughts to Adeline's feminine trustfulness with a slight sense of relief [Adeline being the conventionally feminine woman he thinks about marrying].⁶⁰³

The reality of this strong, independent and ambitious woman is not as alluring as he had imagined. The sense of safety and comfort, the lack of threat or of challenge, offered with the figure of conventional femininity – the demurely flirtatious Adeline who keeps house for her uncle – now seems so much more attractive an alternative. There is no doubt that Richard admires the competency of this trained nurse. He is certainly awed by this 'lady's professional manner'.⁶⁰⁴ But he is not drawn to her as a potential lover and wife – and this is, after all, what he is looking for. Women like Adeline, or like Laura Roberts, the woman Richard finally marries, represent less of a threat to the ideal of male supremacy – a notion that obviously appeals to Richard, in spite of his former, unrealistic attraction to the model of womanhood that works to rebuke this ideal, the New Woman.

A study of Bennett's popular novels helps to illustrate that, by the beginning of the twentieth century, female employment incorporated both work due to financial

⁶⁰² Richard comes across women who fit the New Woman mould in a vegetarian cafe he frequents. However, even though he has no contact with them, they still manage to make him feel uncomfortable – separate from them. (See Bennett, *A Man From the North*, p. 33 and p. 164.)

⁶⁰³ Bennett, *A Man From the North*, pp. 105-106.

need and work ‘unsoiled by the economic excuse’. Attitudes towards how women spent their time had certainly shifted since the mid-Victorian years when middle-class idealism dictated that women belonged firmly within the domestic realm, with philanthropic work forming the almost sole exception. The division between the typical male and female spheres of action increasingly, though very gradually, had experienced a degree of blurring. A number of Bennett’s characters, for example, argue that skills usually ascribed to the female domain have a rightful and valid place in the more masculine orientated realm of public employment. Hilda Lessways is largely content to feel professionally inferior to the more worldly and experienced men working for the newspaper. However, she does derive a feeling of satisfaction when she views that the men running this business are highly disorganised. In this respect, at least, she considers them to be almost child-like. They need her so that the office can run smoothly. In this way, Hilda has the opportunity to employ skills that she learnt as a young woman who was one day expected to manage a domestic establishment. Organisation is in her realm of experience, and so, despite despising domesticity, Hilda is proud to apply her knowledge and her abilities – proud enough to assume a condescending feeling of superiority over these men.⁶⁰⁵ Similarly, Leonora Stanway understands the value of applying her domestic management skills to the public domain. But, unlike Hilda, Leonora is extremely proud of her domestic accomplishments. So, when she visits the London hospital where her daughter works and notes the ‘hysteric excitement’ in the faces of all the officials – ‘the doctors or students, the nurses, and even the dean’ – she feels extremely confident that she could handle the management of that large and busy establishment much better than those who were now doing so.⁶⁰⁶

However, as blurred as the line between the spheres may on occasions become, the fact remains that these realms are largely separate. Women may gain experience in the male realm, but they rarely find belonging there. Hilda Lessways articulates

⁶⁰⁴ Bennett, *A Man From the North*, p. 97.

⁶⁰⁵ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 189.

this more clearly than any other Bennett character. After marrying George Cannon she realises that her vague dreams of freedom and adventure have come to an end.⁶⁰⁷ As with most middle-class women at the beginning of the twentieth century, Hilda's work experience terminates when she assumes the conventionally feminine role of wife:

She had had glimpses, once, of the male world; she had made herself the only woman shorthand-writer in the Five Towns, and one of the earliest in England - dizzy thought! But the glimpses had been in vain and tantalizing. She had been in the male world, but not of it, as though encircled in a glass ball which neither she nor the males could shatter.⁶⁰⁸

Bennett's novels demonstrate that the reading public was aware of the fact that the firm line of distinction between the gender spheres was undergoing a degree of challenge, even of transformation. But, with this analogy to a glass ball, they also show that the boundary separating the spheres also remains appreciated by many, thereby staying strongly in place.



Marie Corelli's novels typically differ from Bennett's in that they provide a much broader overview of turn-of-the-century attitudes towards middle-class female employment. But, despite differences of perspective revealed between the works of these two popular authors, there are also a number of important similarities. Both sets of work acknowledge and are increasingly open to the existing argument that it is acceptable for women to engage in employment for reasons other than earning a much needed income. Both also confirm that the general reading public is very much aware of the fact that allowing middle-class women to volunteer to participate in the public domain strains middle-class ideals concerning femininity.

⁶⁰⁶ Bennett, *Leonora*, pp. 336-337.

⁶⁰⁷ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, pp. 255-256.

Where these novelists depart from one another, however, is in the extent to which they accept deviations from the popular feminine ideal. For example, whereas Bennett's writing attempts to detach itself from the aim of judgement, preferring to observe the range of motives and of reactions of women from this class who gain a position of paid employment, Corelli's books do not. Instead, her novels adopt a strenuous didactic approach – one that makes clear not only the kind of occupations deemed suitable for women, but also the appropriate reasons for entering into these professions. Moreover, whereas Bennett's audience is presumably content to delve into the everyday details of the brief employment experiences of a number of middle-class women and into their subsequent feelings, Corelli's readers are not. The highly escapist and overwhelmingly moral tone of her bestselling novels consistently implies that her aim is to provide a retreat into a world of assurances, of stability and security, rather than confront the more mundane realities of their transitional society. However, far from ignoring these changes, Corelli, amid paradoxes and blatant contradictions, presents a reshaped model of femininity – one that incorporates a number of Victorian and Edwardian society's more visible changes, such as those concerning female employment, but that also manages to hold on to many of the much valued aspects of mid-Victorian gender idealism.

Issues of middle-class female employment concerned only a relatively small proportion of the population at the turn of the twentieth century.⁶⁰⁹ However, Corelli's technique of ignoring the everyday reality of this subject, and of adopting the overseeing position of a social commentator or critic, serves to encourage her wider audience to feel that they are experiencing great changes in this respect. Corelli identifies many of the apparent problems inherent in a 'modern' society that has been forced to deal with these employment-related issues, and then proceeds to provide idealistic and therefore unworkable solutions. She succeeds in outlining a set of unrealistic criteria designed to guide the 'genteel' working

⁶⁰⁸ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 256.

women – including engaging only in occupations intricately linked to the domestic sphere; only accepting work that fulfils that feminine responsibility of being the nation's moral protector; and completely rejecting selfish aims such as self-gratification, fame and fortune, in favour of service to others. However, she also throws pride into this pot – not pride of a selfish or vain nature, but rather pride in the form of 'the spirit of honourable independence'.⁶¹⁰ This is Corelli's most notable concession to the social and economic realities of the modern age, for in this lies her acceptance of the single woman. Far from wallowing in scenes depicting the tragic desperation of the purposeless spinster, Corelli's writing paints the picture of an unmarried, middle-class woman proudly supporting herself by exercising her God-given talents – a woman whose femininity is assured by her modesty, her impeccable sense of integrity and her unfailing duty to the moral welfare of those around her. In the character of Mavis Clare (*The Sorrows of Satan*), for instance, lies one perfectly acceptable version of ideal turn-of-the-century womanhood.

The principal fear revealed in Corelli's fiction is that changes affecting female education and employment will threaten the existence or the viability of feminine idealism. What frightens Corelli is the threat that, with expanding opportunities for female employment, the nation's femininity will become submerged in its masculinity. Her novels express the worry that with larger numbers of women now working in the male domain, women tackling or at least coming into contact with more masculine topics on a daily basis, the distinction between femininity and masculinity will become blurred – and that it will eventually disappear.

Again, Corelli's technique of providing escapism from the more mundane details associated with everyday life means that she does not discuss issues related to the actual occupations that larger numbers of Late Victorian and Edwardian women

⁶⁰⁹ As seen in the earlier section of this chapter that deals with the number of middle-class women engaged in employment.

⁶¹⁰ Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan or The Strange Experience of One Geoffrey Tempest, Millionaire. A Romance*, Methuen, London, 1895, p. 357.

are entering into. Instead, her discussions centre around the noble areas of work in which her female protagonists engage – mainly those of art and of writing. This rule also applies to expressing her fears. The women she singles out as negative or ‘bad’ examples of working women also work in these areas. For the most part, they are the female journalists and the New Women novelists of the era.⁶¹¹ These women do not fulfil any of the criteria of Corelli’s ideal women. Nor do their occupations. ‘Ill-educated lady-paragraphists’ who scrounge up gossip for a small sum of money lack feminine dignity – like Corelli’s Old Lady Maravale who, ‘rather reduced in circumstances, writes a guinea’s worth of scandal a week for one of the papers’.⁶¹² New Women novelists are even more disgraceful. These authors, these ‘self degrading creatures who delineate their heroines as wallowing in unchastity, and who write freely on subjects which men would hesitate to name’, are described in *The Sorrows of Satan* as the ‘unnatural hybrids of no-sex’.⁶¹³ It is not just that these women do not fit the mould of the ideal woman, but rather that they actively defy proper feminine thought and behaviour – for the most part, by writing about sexuality in a manner that Corelli implies would make most men blush. Such an unforgivable transgression results in these women workers being robbed of the right to claim their womanhood.

This fear that working women will abandon the rules guiding other members of their sex accounts for Corelli’s overwhelmingly defensive treatment of her female protagonists who do work – whether for a living or for the fulfilment of ambition. The repetitive insistence of Corelli’s avowals of the assured femininity of these women and of the moral impeccability of their work leaves the reader with

⁶¹¹ David Rubinstein writes that the number of female journalists during this era rose as the publication of women’s magazines increased and as typically female topics, such as fashion and society news, gained more attention in the press. For more information on this area of employment, see Rubinstein, pp. 73-86.

⁶¹² Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 260. Moreover, just to ensure that none of Lady Maravale’s lack of feminine dignity escapes the audience, Corelli later portrays her ‘gorging’ herself on chicken salad and truffles. (Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 271.)

⁶¹³ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 221 and pp. 305-306. For more anti-New Woman sentiment see, for example, Marie Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, Methuen, London, 1912 [1896], p. 104.

absolutely no doubt as to the appropriateness of their occupations and the individual products of their creativity.

Three of Corelli's protagonists readily come to mind when discussing appropriate female employment. The female narrator of *The Life Everlasting* occupies a rather vague position in the realm of philosophy. Her actual job is unclear, but it is known that she researches and writes and earns her own living. Her position is also unassailably feminine. Angela Sovrani (*The Master-Christian*) is a painter – indeed, the greatest painter of her era. Angela is femininely fragile in appearance, vulnerable in love, perfectly modest, extremely talented in the ways of her profession and an absolute moral pillar. And, as has been mentioned, Mavis Clare is *The Sorrows of Satan's* ideal 'spinster'. Like Angela, Mavis is a 'genius', only in the field of literature rather than art. Similar to Angela, Mavis is also impeccably feminine and morally irreproachable. What is revealing about all of these examples is that the occupations referred to hover uneasily between the traditional male and female spheres of action. Works of philosophical, literary or artistic merit can be produced within the domestic environment, but it cannot be denied that their main aim is to reach a wider, public audience. The high moral content of the works of each of these women, the fact that each has a lesson or a message to deliver to the world, absolves them of any charge of self-gratification that could be levelled at them and appeases any concerns about the appropriateness of their intentions. In a very obvious way, then, Corelli successfully straddles the male world of ambition and the female realm of moral responsibility.

Angela Sovrani and Mavis Clare represent two slightly differing versions of the ideal, modern woman. For example, Angela is presented as the genteel woman who does not have to work but who does so in order to exercise her God-given virtues and talents – a woman who, in spite of some dramatic difficulties, has every hope of combining a successful career with romantic love. Whereas Mavis, although matching Angela in terms of skill and intention, differs markedly from her in that she does not hope for love. Mavis never marries. Her 'master',

therefore, is God Himself. With Angela, Corelli paints a picture of the perfect turn-of-the-century woman with a suitable vocation and a potential husband. With Mavis, she further reshapes this model of womanhood to allow for social and economic shifts that saw a small but increasing number of women seek work in order to support themselves.

However, no matter how perfect Angela and Mavis may appear, in both cases their gender is defended with such vigour, such a degree of fervour, that this fiction strongly suggests that engaging in paid employment, although gaining in acceptance, was still generally regarded as dubious – as a threat to their sense of womanhood. Yet, when presented with the alternative, with the more conventional, less intellectual task of marrying and bringing up children, exercising one's intellect and one's skills shines comparatively brightly. Playing the devil's advocate in *The Sorrows of Satan*, Corelli asks if women – 'should be kept in their places as men's drudges or toys - as wives, mothers, nurses, cooks, menders of socks and shirts, and housekeepers generally'.⁶¹⁴ In *The Master-Christian*, she reiterates this challenge:

For why should a woman think? Why should a woman dare to be a genius? It seemed very strange! How much more natural for her to marry some decent man of established position and be content with babies and plan needlework! Here [with the character of Angela Sovrani] was an abnormal prodigy in the ways of womanhood, - a feminine creature who ventured to give an opinion of her own on something else than dress, - who presumed as it were, to set the world thinking hard on a particular phase of history.⁶¹⁵

Corelli's use of irony is not subtle – its point is clear. Angela and Mavis are far to be preferred, far more admired, than the multitude of women who spend their lives

⁶¹⁴ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 173.

fulfilling the typical roles of wife and mother – and who are rarely presented with the opportunity of exercising their intellectual capabilities.

And yet, Angela and Mavis are ideal women. They look womanly. Indeed, Corelli almost obsessively portrays the full extent of their feminine appearance. In her three page introduction to Angela's appearance, she lingers over the apparent juxtaposition between her delicate, beautiful, feminine gracefulness and her almost masculine degree of skill and ambition.⁶¹⁶ Corelli summarises:

Certainly in her fragile appearance she expressed nothing save indefinable charm – no one, studying her physiognomy, would have accredited her with genius, power, and the large conceptions of a Murillo or a Raphael; - yet within the small head lay a marvellous brain – and the delicate body was possessed by a spirit of amazing potency to conjure with.⁶¹⁷

To further assure her readers of her womanliness, as if further assurance is required, Corelli explains that Angela is vulnerable in matters of the heart – indubitably an admired feminine trait.⁶¹⁸

Mavis Clare is treated in a remarkably similar manner. The failed writer, Geoffrey Tempest, approaches the enormously successful Mavis with preconceived ideas about her appearance and personality – but finds himself pleasantly surprised. She is not 'the dyspeptic, sour, savage old blue-stockings'⁶¹⁹ that the combination of her gender and occupation calls up in Tempest's mind. Instead, she is 'nothing but a

⁶¹⁵ Marie Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, Methuen, London, 1900, p. 587.

⁶¹⁶ Corelli declares, for example, that Angela was 'true womanly in every delicate sentiment, fancy and feeling' but that she also possessed 'something of the man-hero in her scorn of petty aims, her delight in noble deeds, her courage, her ambition, her devotion to duty and her unflinching sense of honour'. (Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, pp. 94-95.)

⁶¹⁷ Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, p. 95.

⁶¹⁸ Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, pp. 95-96. For further discussion of feminine vulnerability to love, see chapter 7 'Romantic Love'.

⁶¹⁹ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 222.

fair-haired women in a white gown...with a tiny toy terrier on her lap.’⁶²⁰ He continues –

No such slight feminine creature as the one I now looked upon could ever be capable of the intellectual grasp and power of ‘Differences’, the book I secretly admired and wondered at, but which I had anonymously striven to ‘quash’ in its successful career. The writer of such a work, I imagined, must needs be of a more or less strong physique, with pronounced features and an impressive personality.⁶²¹

With further surprise, he concludes – ‘With all her intellectual gifts she was yet a lovable woman’ – a lovable woman whose example and whose writing supplies the moral and spiritual guidance that Tempest sorely lacks.⁶²²

This spiritual and moral element is pivotal in Corelli’s depiction of employed women. This compensates for any feelings of personal pride, self-gratification, admiration or money that working may result in. It fulfils one of the main criteria of the ideal woman – that of duty and service to others. Moreover, each of these women is inspired by God to produce the work that they do.⁶²³ And although they both achieve a great deal of fame and not inconsiderable sums of money through selling their wares, this is never the real reason why they do what they do. Rather, they wish to influence those who come into contact with their work – to inspire them to do good. Their duty, Corelli’s characters state, is to others, not to themselves.⁶²⁴

⁶²⁰ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 222.

⁶²¹ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, pp. 222-223.

⁶²² Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 230.

⁶²³ See Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, p. 130 and, for instances where the spiritual obligations of writing or Mavis Clare’s faith are referred to, see Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 246, p. 307, p. 431 and p. 486.

⁶²⁴ For instance, see Sylvie Hermenstein and Cyrillon Verginaud in Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, p. 367 and p. 594 respectively.

Although it has to be said that Angela's desire to affect as many people as possible travels dangerously close to self-gratifying, naked ambition:

She had dreams of seeing her great picture borne away out
of Rome to Paris, and London, to be gazed upon by
thousands who would take its lesson home to their hearts
and lives.⁶²⁵

Only her high moral intentions save her. Corelli's female characters are not without the fervour of pride or ambition, but displays of this kind tend to be balanced with equally marked exhibitions of womanly modesty and selflessness.⁶²⁶ Moreover, at one stage, Angela is actually rebuked for not applying herself to her work in a wholehearted way. Having been dramatically disappointed in love (her artist fiancé stabs her in the back in a fit of jealousy over the superb quality of her painting), she loses some of her artistic zeal. The man, readers are led to believe, who is actually her true soul-mate, tells her that she is selfish to abandon her duty of delivering a great moral and spiritual message to the world in the form of her art simply because of the disappointment of her heart. Cyrillon pleads with her:

Be Angela once more! – the guiding angel of more lives
than you know of!⁶²⁷

Angela's message, then, is the whole point of her work. In Corelli's novels, the sin of selfishness does not only apply to seeking personal fame and fortune. It also applies to abandoning the feminine duty of morally protecting those around. As with Corelli's own works, the extent of Mavis and Angela's fame is justified by the sheer breadth of the audience to whom these highly important spiritual and moral lessons can be delivered.

Corelli's fiction firmly debunks any belief that the ideal state of womanhood involved idleness. On the contrary, a lack of purpose or a lack of usefulness is considered unforgivably wasteful. And exercising one's intellectual abilities

⁶²⁵ Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, pp. 294-295.

⁶²⁶ Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, pp. 346-347.

provides the optimum means of expressing this usefulness – for a woman as well as for a man. Working for a living, far from being pronounced shameful, is actually a dignified act. Mavis Clare, who ‘hasn’t a penny in the world that she does not earn’, certainly holds her head up high in public. Furthermore, her skills as a businesswoman when dealing with publishers (skills akin to those for which, Annette Federico argues, Corelli is now renowned) cause admiration, not disdain.⁶²⁸ And Mavis is not alone. Similar sentiments are voiced in *The Life Everlasting*. After being accused of being a ‘dreamer’ by the millionaire, Mr Harland, the female narrator of the novel replies:

Why, even with the underlying flattery of his words, should he call me a dreamer? I had worked for my own living as practically as himself in the world, and if not with such financially successful results, only because my aims had never been mere money-spinning. He had attained enormous wealth, - I a modest competence, - he was old and I was young, - he was ill and miserable, - I was well and happy, - which of us was the ‘dreamer’?⁶²⁹

Importantly, however, neither of these women attain extravagant measures of fortune by virtue of their labour.⁶³⁰ Such overtly mercenary ambitions are declared unwomanly. But working for a modest sum instils pride – a far cry from the sense of shame accompanying the pathetic plight of the mid-Victorian ‘spinster’.⁶³¹ The fact that Corelli feels that she has to emphatically stress this

⁶²⁷ Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, p. 594.

⁶²⁸ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 142. See also Annette R. Federico, *Idol of Suburbia. Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville and London, 2000.

⁶²⁹ Marie Corelli, *The Life Everlasting. A Reality of Romance*, Methuen, London, 1911, pp. 85-86.

⁶³⁰ The narrator of *The Life Everlasting* admits that she works hard – that she lives a life that involves ‘incessant study and certainly no surplus of riches’. (Corelli, *The Life Everlasting*, p. 147.) Mavis Clare, in spite of her overwhelming popularity, readers are informed, was possessed of a ‘merely moderate share of fortune which even in its slight proportion was only due to her own hard incessant work’. (Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 304.) Angela Sovrani is a slightly different matter. She has no financial reason to work, and her ‘great’ painting which is sold to the American nation fetches a price of £20,000. However, Corelli makes it abundantly clear that this artist’s motivation is moral not monetary. (Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, p. 578.)

⁶³¹ In illustration of this, Tempest declares that Mavis Clare, who ‘earns independence by intellectual work and worth alone, is entitled to feel a far greater pride than those who by mere

point about the noble nature of a woman earning her own living, however, suggests that her view is not yet fully accepted among the general public. Her tone certainly implies that her reading public needs some convincing. But, the very existence of this argument in her bestselling books, and even its constant repetition, demonstrates that it is a notion that is in the process of gaining a more widespread level of popular acceptance.

Corelli's novels, then, do tackle the very topical turn-of-the-century issue of female employment, but they do so by removing it from the realm of realism to that of escapism and idealism. Her books uphold the Victorian ideal that a woman's primary goal in life is to be man's helpmate. The problem with modern society, however, is that too many men degrade this relationship by not respecting female intellectual and creative abilities. In short, Corelli claims that male jealousy of female accomplishments renders this ideal unworkable in reality. The solution to all of this is that women need to find a decent man who respects them and who, in the words of *The Master-Christian's* Aubrey Leigh, 'will give her scope for her actions, freedom for her intelligence, and trust for her instincts'.⁶³² Corelli bitterly blames women for the crime of degrading their own sex, but she also criticises men for their contributing attitudes and actions.

That is where we women-workers have to suffer! Men grudge us the laurel, but they forget that we are trying to win it only that we may wear the rose more fittingly! A woman tries to do a great and noble thing, not that she may vex or humiliate a man by superiority, but that she may be more worthy to be his mate and helper in the world, - and also, that her children may reverence her for something more than mere animal duties of nursing and tenderness.

chance of birth or heritage become the possessors of millions.' (See Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 357.)

⁶³² Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, p. 133.

How proud to-day would be any man or woman who could
point to Rosa Bonheur and say, 'She was my mother'!⁶³³

Corelli's novels want to recognise female intelligence. They want the social purpose of women to surpass that of being a wife and a mother – a notion that certainly creates room for the unmarried woman. But, they do not want to go too far by actually challenging the ideal of male supremacy. Nor do they want to run the risk of appearing to promote the celibate career woman over the wife and mother. It is revealing, for example, that in spite of all their worldly accomplishments, Angela Sovrani and Mavis Clare still retain faith in the doctrine of male supremacy. Whereas Angela has every prospect of finally aligning herself with her true soul-mate – a man who has a noble mission in life, a man whom she can help and one she can look up to; the unmarried Mavis has God, the supreme male, to guide and inspire her.

This solution that Corelli proposes is entirely idealistic – unworkable in the 'real' world. However, Corelli's audience is not interested in discussing 'real' problems and in advocating 'real' answers. At least, this is not what Corelli's many bestsellers provide. What Corelli does present her multitude of readers with is escapism from the many daily issues that their society faces concerning female employment – escapism in the form of repeated assurances that even with changes in this realm of employment (changes that are not altogether unwelcome), the femininity of the nation's women remains largely secure.



The novels of Bennett and Corelli approach the whole issue of middle-class female employment differently. Bennett's books concentrate on exploring individual motives for engaging in paid work and personal reactions to those experiences. Corelli's more escapist fiction, however, avoids the more mundane aspects of this topic, such as income and workplace concerns, by frequently, and conveniently,

⁶³³ Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, p. 446.

portraying women of independent means who only exercise their intellectual capabilities by producing works of art or literature – works that are destined for the public sphere, but produced within the private realm. Yet, despite their differences, both Bennett and Corelli help to demonstrate that, although the lines separating typical male and female spheres of activity were slightly mobile, by the early decades of the twentieth century, these boundaries still remained largely in place.

In spite of the fact that only a relatively small number of middle-class women entered into paid employment during this period, this issue still managed to spark widespread public debate – a debate in which Bennett, Corelli and their readers were involved. Moreover, consideration of middle-class female employment within these popular novels necessarily drew readers into a discussion of femininity. Middle-class female involvement in the employment sector frequently served to challenge traditional gender notions. Recognition of this in popular novels of the time, therefore, forced a redefinition of these ideals. This point is especially pertinent to Corelli's novels. For, on the one hand, these books endorsed some aspects of turn-of-the-century social change by incorporating them into their depictions of middle-class women, but, on the other, they reacted to the perceived threats that this represented to traditional concepts of femininity by firmly reasserting the value of these ideals.

Still, and whatever their position on gender idealisation and the precise role that employment and careers played in reshaping Late Victorian and Edwardian concepts of femininity, Bennett's and Corelli's novels both confirm that these issues corresponded with the concerns of the reading public – that they at least struck a chord within their readers' minds.

Section C

The Spiritual Side of Life

The more intangible or spiritual aspects of life are extremely important in the popular novels studied here – but to varying degrees and in varying ways. Whereas Bennett’s fiction explores spiritual or religious thought only periodically, the entire course of Corelli’s novels are often directed by a general sense of Christianity mixed with an element of spiritual mysticism. Yet, even considering their differing approaches to the prominence of spiritual and religious sentiments, each testifies to a general turn-of-the-century shift away from recognition of institutional religion towards a less formal, more pervasive sense of non-denominational Christianity – a sense of spirituality that coloured many facets of Late Victorian and Edwardian life.

The positioning of this section within this thesis reflects this. For, even though the chapter ‘Religion and Spirituality’ has not been coupled with any other, thereby implying that it operates independently of them, it still touches on aspects of all of them. Hence the centrality of its placement, where it acts as something of a link between the section concerning how unmarried women were expected to occupy their time and that relating to romantic relationships.

Moreover, occasional references are made to the thoughts and experiences of married women in the following chapter – at least where Corelli’s bestselling novels are analysed. As has been explained in Section A, this is because Corelli is not as interested in characterisation as she is in gender idealisation. As a result, in her books all the middle-class women, whether married or unmarried, are subject to the same values and standards. Therefore, Corelli’s comments on married women’s experiences usually have direct implications for unmarried women. Single or not, then, these women contribute to an understanding of Corelli’s views, particularly as these concern spirituality and morality.

Chapter 6

Religion and Spirituality

Religion: Recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship; the general mental and moral attitude resulting from this belief, with reference to its effects upon the individual or the community; personal or general acceptance of this feeling as a standard of spiritual and practical life.⁶³⁴

Spirituality: The quality or condition of being spiritual; attachment to or regard for things of the spirit as opposed to material or worldly interests.⁶³⁵

Each of the above definitions is pertinent to this chapter which looks at the links between spirituality and unmarried middle-class women as depicted in the novels of Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli. However, whereas the term ‘religion’ is more relevant to an analysis of Bennett’s middlebrow literature, that of ‘spirituality’ is more suited to a discussion of Corelli’s bestselling novels. A very Christian-centred notion of spirituality is never far from the surface in Corelli’s highly didactic writing. In fact, in most cases, opposition between the spirit and the material guides the entire course of the story. Spiritual or religious belief, on the other hand, is not a major theme in Bennett’s fiction. Yet, when it does appear, its brief presence is highly significant. This is because religious faith or rather crises of faith form pivotal episodes in the lives of several of his female protagonists.

⁶³⁴ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, R. W. Burchfield (ed.), (2nd edition prepared by John Andrew Simpson and Edmund S. C. Weiner), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989, vol. XIII, p. 569.

⁶³⁵ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. XVI, p. 259.

The novels of each of these authors address the issue of the expected place of spirituality in the lives of Late Victorian and Edwardian middle-class women. Although, again, they do so in very different ways. Bennett's books explore the shape that spiritual and religious thought assumes in the minds of these women – if it assumes any shape at all. Occasionally they penetrate the spiritual depth of his female protagonists – especially during times of great personal difficulty. What these narratives discover is that personal accountability for individual peace of mind largely takes precedence over consolation wrought from a particular religious creed. Leading a morally sound life is as important, if not more important, than denominational belief or practice – for women as well as men. Like Bennett's fiction, Corelli's writing esteems a general notion of Christian morality over denominational faith. However, unlike his middlebrow works, her often-escapist fiction draws a firm distinction between male and female approaches to spirituality. Expressing a deep concern for the continuing strength of the relationship between religiousness and gender idealisation, her stories demand that 'true' women be inherently spiritual. In attempting to align this concept of female religious and moral superiority with the still popular notion of male supremacy, an alignment only awkwardly achieved, Corelli helps to reveal the extent to which tension existed in turn-of-the-century society between continued assertion of moral ideals and increasingly apparent social, moral and economic shifts. The perceived growth of religious doubt and changes affecting the position of single middle-class women (such as increasing employment opportunities and growing recognition of female intellectuality, for example) made it more difficult for Corelli to claim that female power resided only in the private realm of interiority and spirituality and that this power remained inferior to that held by men who participated in the more active public sphere.



As many historians have discovered, any attempt to plot a history of spiritual or religious sentiments is bound to be daunting.⁶³⁶ There are a number of closely related reasons for this. The exact nature of religious belief is often difficult to articulate. This is so even in the minds of the individuals concerned. Moreover, there is a shortage of historical material offering extensive insights into such an intensely private area of investigation. Few people left documents recording their reactions to their personal convictions. Still fewer 'ordinary' middle- or working-class people did so.⁶³⁷ As the religious historian Owen Chadwick remarks: 'The influence of moral ideas upon a person is not something which the person himself can chart or fathom, still less his friends, still less the analyst dependant on written sources.'⁶³⁸ François Bédarida supports a similar point of view. He argues, in reference to religion and family ideology, that: 'These are special areas that control social conduct at a deep level, but they are hard to penetrate in spite of much research, for they are sealed up by secrets buried in individual consciences or in the collective unconscious.'⁶³⁹ Such a state of affairs has led Chadwick to argue that the question of a country's moral and religious mentality can only be illustrated rather than analysed.⁶⁴⁰ And without an abundance of valuable resources, many scholars have turned to statistics of religious activity to do just that.⁶⁴¹

⁶³⁶ Gail Malmgreen, for example, refers to the attempt to capture the religious beliefs of 'ordinary' women as a 'daunting' assignment'. Gail Malmgreen, 'Introduction', in Gail Malmgreen (ed.), *Religion in the Lives of Englishwomen, 1760-1930*, Croom Helm, London and Sydney, 1986, pp. 1-9, p. 4. See also, Owen Chadwick, 'The Established Church Under Attack', in Anthony Symondson (ed.), *The Victorian Crises of Faith*, S.P.C.K., London, 1970, pp. 91-105, p. 91; François Bédarida, *A Social History of England 1851-1990*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990, p. 110; and J.F.C. Harrison, *Late Victorian Britain, 1875-1901*, Fontana Press, London, 1990, p. 101.

⁶³⁷ Harrison, p. 101.

⁶³⁸ Chadwick, p. 91.

⁶³⁹ Bédarida, p. 110.

⁶⁴⁰ He uses, as an example, the idea that Christianity was integral to the work of countless social reformers in Victorian England. No doubt Christianity coloured their work, but it is not possible to discover to what extent this was so, and to what degree other factors such as philosophy, politics, socialism and education, for example, helped to motivate them. (Chadwick, p. 91.)

⁶⁴¹ Harrison, p. 101.

However, external signs of religious observance may not always constitute a reliable guide to 'internal religious convictions'.⁶⁴² This does not mean that statistics of church participation are useless or without value. As J. F. C. Harrison contends, they do provide at least a possible clue as to spiritual beliefs because people do not usually attend religious services unless they absorb or approve of many of the values associated with that institution.⁶⁴³ Still, their value as clues to the complexity, confusion and inconsistencies of inner convictions is limited. Furthermore, the available information on religious adherence is 'notoriously fraught', which is a major reason why historians disagree about the precise levels of religious participation observed throughout the Victorian and Edwardian eras.⁶⁴⁴ Methods of calculating participation vary and results reflect this. Based on differing estimates of, among other factors, church attendance; church membership figures; marriage, baptism and burial returns; and subscriptions and pew rents, some argue that religious activity declined slightly in the last decades of the nineteenth century, whereas others claim that it had in fact outgrown that evident in the mid-century.⁶⁴⁵ Moreover, religious participation was not uniform

⁶⁴² Jose Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914*, Penguin, London, 1994, p. 153; and Harrison, p. 101.

⁶⁴³ Harrison, p. 101.

⁶⁴⁴ Callum Brown adds that 'snapshot' data, such as that provided by numerous short-term surveys, is not hugely useful in providing insight into such a complex area of change: data that has been collected over a long period of time is infinitely to be preferred. (Callum G. Brown, 'A Revisionist Approach to Religious Change', in Steve Bruce (ed.), *Religion and Modernization. Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992, pp. 31-58, p. 41.)

⁶⁴⁵ Using information collected from various church sources and surveys, such as those conducted by the *British Weekly* in 1886, Charles Booth in the 1890s, and the *Daily News* in 1903-1904, Harris argues that 'a higher proportion of British people were active members of religious denominations than at any earlier time during Queen Victoria's reign'. (Harris, p. 154.) Callum Brown supports similar findings. He contends that over the last 60 years of the nineteenth century religious adherence grew substantially, only peaking in the 1904-1905 period in mainland Britain at around 50 per cent of the population (he includes church members and Sunday School enrollees in his calculations). (Brown, p. 47.) However, Chadwick's and Harrison's calculations diverge from these. Chadwick claims that in the late Victorian years more people were going to church than in the early Victorian era, but not as many as during the middle years of the period. (Chadwick, pp. 94-95.) And Harrison argues that overall church attendance rose in proportion with increases in the population up to approximately 1886, only to decline afterwards. (Harrison, p. 102.) He contends that there were more people attending religious services in 1901, but that the proportion of attenders to the total population was smaller than it had been when Queen Victoria came to the throne. Subsequently, the total number of non-attenders was also higher at the turn of the twentieth century than in 1837. With these figures in mind, Harrison argues that, rather than being more religious, English society was actually more secular by the Edwardian period than during the Victorian era. (Harrison, p. 130.)

across the country, it varied according to region and social class. In support of this, Hugh McLeod argues that,

Broadly speaking, middle-class people were more likely to attend church or to be church members than working-class people, rural-dwellers more than those living in cities, and women more than men. There were also considerable regional differences. Inevitably, however, the picture was much more complicated than this bald summary might suggest.⁶⁴⁶

However, whatever the exact figures, historians generally agree that at the turn of the twentieth century, a large minority of the English population were active Christians – a vast majority of these practising some form of Protestant Christianity.⁶⁴⁷

The influence that religious institutions had in the running of the State did decrease during the Late Victorian and Edwardian period, but there is no indisputable way of linking this growing separation of Church and State with ‘a decline in the extent and intensity of individual belief’.⁶⁴⁸ Instead of supporting a widespread fall in religious faith, Harris, for example, claims that there was an ‘increasing vagueness in private conviction and a growing reticence about all

⁶⁴⁶ Hugh McLeod, *Religion and Society in England, 1850-1914*, St. Martin Press, New York, 1996, p. 60. See also Map 3: ‘Church attendance in rural areas in 1851 compared with attendance in large towns in the 1880s’. (McLeod, *Religion and Society in England*, p. 63.) For more information on regional, city and class variations, see Hugh McLeod, ‘Secular Cities? Berlin, London, and New York in the Later Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries’, in Steve Bruce (ed.), *Religion and Modernization. Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992, pp. 59-89, for example pp. 68-69; and Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut and London, 1996, p. 241.

⁶⁴⁷ See for example, Harrison, p. 119; and Mitchell, p. 239.

⁶⁴⁸ McLeod, ‘Secular Cities?’, p. 64. It is not within the scope of this chapter to discuss such an intricate and complex area of historical debate as secularisation. For detailed discussions of this, see Brown, for example, p. 31; McLeod, ‘Secular Cities?’, for example, p. 64; David Hempton, ‘Religious Life in Industrial Britain, 1830-1914’, in Sheridan Gilley and W. J. Sheils (eds.), *A History of Religion in Britain. Practice and Belief from Pre-Roman Times to the Present*, Blackwell, Oxford and Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1994, pp. 306-321, especially, p. 321; and Harris, p. 152, p. 170 and p. 179.

reference to religion in public and professional life', and that this was attributable to social change at the turn of the century.⁶⁴⁹ Harris continues:

It was the diversity and privatization of religion, rather than unbelief or 'secularization' *per se*, that led almost accidentally during this period to the growing emergence of a secular society and the secular state.⁶⁵⁰

This growing tendency to further internalise and privatise religious faith adds even more complexity to the task of building up a picture of common attitudes towards spirituality, but it also lends support to the value of novels as a historical source. Novels, especially popular novels, represent one way of accessing popular spiritual sentiments.

Whatever the statistics for religious observance, it is generally agreed that Christianity coloured everyday turn-of-the-century life. Even though not everyone, nor even a majority of the population, attended church or greatly occupied their minds with religious thoughts, religion was still 'assumed to be relevant to all aspects of national life.'⁶⁵¹ In fact, McLeod finds the pervasiveness of a general, undenominational sense of Christian morality to be quite remarkable, adding that:

one must be struck by the degree to which Christianity was at least passively accepted by the great majority of the population, and to which it helped to shape people's world-picture, provided a basis for widely accepted moral principles, and provided rites which were used by the great majority of the population.⁶⁵²

⁶⁴⁹ Harris, p. 179.

⁶⁵⁰ Harris, p. 179.

⁶⁵¹ Harrison, pp. 100-101. Hempton and Harris agree that many avoided attending church, but point to high attendances at Sunday Schools as partial evidence of the extent of turn of the century England's religiousness. Harris argues that Sunday Schools attendance nearly trebled between the 1860s and 1906. (See Hempton, p. 309; and Harris, p. 154.)

⁶⁵² McLeod, *Religion and Society*, p. 2. Bédarida, too, is struck by what McLeod terms 'the massive presence of Christianity in so many areas of daily life', arguing that 'whether he [or she] liked it or not, every Englishman [and woman] was moulded by Christianity to the depths of his [or her] being.' (McLeod, *Religion and Society*, p. 71; and Bédarida, p. 110, see also pp. 112-113.)

In addition, Callum Brown and Sally Mitchell cite the phenomenon of ‘respectability’ – a concept of social morality which, Mitchell claims, was often more important than class lines when determining social distinction – as evidence of society’s continuing religiousness.⁶⁵³ Harrison and Hempton agree, claiming that many Late Victorians looked to Christianity, not for a system of credal beliefs, but rather for general rules that would help guide them to a ‘good’ and happy life.⁶⁵⁴ This is not to argue that this notion had its roots solely in turn-of-the-century society. Indeed, Hempton argues that an ‘ethical and community-based definition of Christian living has a long history in English religion’.⁶⁵⁵ Yet, whatever the outcome of debates concerning actual levels of religious practice or their significance, it remains the case that general ideas about ‘Christian living’ permeated Late Victorian and Edwardian society.

Nor does this widespread sense of Christian values preclude a growing awareness of turn of the century religious doubt or at least uncertainty. A history of religious doubt, like that of religious belief, is a highly complex area of investigation – one that is debated rigorously in current scholarship, but can only receive scant attention in this brief chapter. The historian, Mark Bevir, claims that:

Cultural developments – the rise of modern science, historical scholarship, and a new moral conscience – put pressure on Victorian religion.⁶⁵⁶

⁶⁵³ Brown, p. 37; and Mitchell, p. 262. Mitchell also adds that ‘respectability’ was especially important among the poor and lower middle class for whom ‘being respectable was a way to maintain self-respect and public reputation’. (Mitchell, p. 262.)

⁶⁵⁴ Harrison, p. 118; and Hempton, p. 317.

⁶⁵⁵ Hempton, p. 317.

⁶⁵⁶ Mark Bevir, ‘Annie Besant’s Quest for Truth: Christianity, Secularism and New Age Thought’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 50, no. 1, 1999, pp. 62-93, p. 73. Harris supports the contention that numerous Late Victorians experienced intellectual struggles concerning religious faith. Harris claims that between the years 1870 to 1914, patterns of religion and religious belief changed in response to shifts of thought taking place in the intellectual realm. These shifts she cites as, geological challenges to the Book of Genesis; new modes of German historical scholarship that questioned the historicity of many parts of the Bible and ‘in particular emphasised the temporal and human limitations of the person of Jesus Christ’; and, between 1859 and 1871, a series of biological hypotheses associated with Darwin which claimed that creation and evolution were more a process of ‘random selection’ than ‘divine providence’. (Harris, pp. 170-171.) However, Chadwick argues that it is difficult to find recorded examples of individuals who lost faith because of, among other things, the discovery that Genesis Chapter 1 was not literally true, or evidence of

The results of this increased pressure, Bevir argues, ranged from rising religious indifference to the development of new forms of Christianity to complete rejection of Christianity and instead the embracing of the other forms of spirituality or even of an atheistic materialism.⁶⁵⁷ Doubtless, these conditions helped to account for what some Late Victorian social commentators identified as a ‘mood of doubt’.⁶⁵⁸ However, determining just how far religious doubt extended during this period is an impossible task. Indeed, even discerning the type of supporting evidence to look for is far from simple.⁶⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the immense popularity of Mrs Humphry Ward’s novel on religious doubt, *Robert Elsmere* (1888), and the substantial popularity of William Hale White’s, *Autobiography of Mark Rutherford* (1885) and *Mark Rutherford’s Deliverance* (1888), does lend support to the idea that discussions, and perhaps tolerance, of religious doubt was increasing.⁶⁶⁰

Furthermore, with particular reference to Later Victorians, Harrison maintains that there is ‘ample testimony’ to the existence of uncertainty and despair.⁶⁶¹ However, he does not necessarily attribute these sentiments to religious or intellectual doubt. Instead, and although he admits that personal records of ‘ordinary’ people are scarce, he does speculate that feelings of anxiety or despair were much more likely to be connected to more common or everyday concerns, such as ‘poverty, status, health, accidents, old age and death.’⁶⁶² Despite a scarcity or ambiguity of evidence, then, there is no disputing the fact that a degree of

how unsettling this was for organised religion. Furthermore, he asserts that intelligent people did not view it as literal anyway. (Chadwick, p. 96.) And Harrison, although he concedes that there would have been a degree of intellectual doubt resulting from Bible criticism, also claims that a majority of church-goers would have mentally accommodated for this. Most of those attending church were not there simply due to an intellectual interest in religion. For the most part, their adherence would have been motivated by ‘moral and ethical’ interest. (Harrison, p. 121.)

⁶⁵⁷ Bevir, p. 73.

⁶⁵⁸ Harrison, p. 120.

⁶⁵⁹ Harrison, p. 130; McLeod, ‘Secular Cities?’, p. 67; and Chadwick, pp. 96-97.

⁶⁶⁰ Harrison claims that nowhere was the issue of religious doubt treated more sensitively than in the ‘Mark Rutherford’ novels, or more widely dramatised than in *Robert Elsmere*, which was immensely popular both in Britain and America, selling perhaps a million copies in 20 years. (Harrison, p. 125.)

⁶⁶¹ Harrison, p. 124.

⁶⁶² Harrison, pp. 130-131.

religious uncertainty did exist at the turn of the twentieth century. But, the extent of this religious decline should not be over-estimated. Overshadowing the existence of doubt or uncertainty, for example, is an abundance of material that illustrates a prevailing spirit of Christianity – one evident in most aspects of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century society, whether philanthropy, politics or even leisure and entertainment.

Elisabeth Jay remarks that Evangelical sentiments, not necessarily linked to any religious institution, lay behind a host of nineteenth-century charitable societies. She claims, in connection with this, that one of the more inspirational forces of this era was the idea of a ‘sense of personal accountability to God for one’s fellow souls’.⁶⁶³ Charity work surrounding the plight of unmarried mothers effectively illustrates this. This work was initiated earlier in the nineteenth century but gained increasing momentum over the late Victorian and Edwardian period. Ann Higginbotham points out that, in the 1860s and 1870s, a number of London charities, loosely or formally connected to the Church of England, began to offer unmarried mothers assistance (for example, through Mrs Main’s Refuge for Deserted Women and Their Infants, and Homes of Hope which catered for mothers and their illegitimate children).⁶⁶⁴ By the later decades of the nineteenth century, the Women’s Social Service, an independently-managed branch of the Salvation Army, was performing extensive work in providing much needed accommodation, as well as the opportunity for moral reform, for unmarried mothers. Higginbotham stresses the value of these endeavours, claiming that

Salvation Army work with unmarried mothers prefigured developments in social work during the inter-war years when the provision of maternity care replaced brothel

⁶⁶³ Elisabeth Jay, *Faith and Doubt in Victorian Britain*, Macmillan, Houndsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London, 1986, p. 16.

⁶⁶⁴ Ann R. Higginbotham, ‘Respectable Sinners: Salvation Army Rescue Work with Unmarried Mothers, 1884-1914’, in Gail Malmgreen (ed.), *Religion in the Lives of Englishwomen, 1760-1930*, Croom Helm, London and Sydney, 1986, pp. 216-233, p. 219.

visiting and Piccadilly patrols as the chief occupation of church-connected moral welfare workers.⁶⁶⁵

Christian motivation at the turn of the century, then, did much to help shape future social work.

Similar to philanthropy, many aspects of the political world were inspired by Christianity. English public life was becoming secularised in that the Church was undergoing separation from the State, yet religion still had an influence in politics, albeit in a much more subtle and individual manner than previously. For example, Chadwick points to the remarkable religiousness of the early leaders of the Labour movement who were attempting to secure the political allegiance of workers.⁶⁶⁶ He refers, in particular, to the early writings and speeches of Keir Hardie, Ramsey Macdonald, Philip Snowden, and George Lansbury which all portray the importance of the religious and moral ideal to their collective conception of socialism. Their works, Chadwick claims,

tend to show that a religiousness of mood and language was politically desirable; that is, that they would be more likely to be heard by the audience which they sought, if they dissociated socialism from its continental atmosphere of class warfare and revolution and associated it with Christian ideas of fraternity and care for the poor.⁶⁶⁷

This widespread invocation of Christian notions, however, did not necessarily entail endorsing religious institutions. It was increasingly possible to embrace Christian morality while at the same time attacking churches for being unrepresentative of Christianity itself. Nor was such a reaction exclusive to politicians. Novelists, too, often divorced the establishments supposedly representing Christianity from truly Christian notions. Harrison argues that

⁶⁶⁵ Higginbotham, p. 229.

⁶⁶⁶ Chadwick, p. 93.

⁶⁶⁷ Chadwick, p. 94. Similar references to the Christian appeal of socialism can also be found in Hempton, p. 319; and Harris, p. 159.

popular novels, for instance, which dramatised this idea, such as Hall Caine's *The Christian* (1897) which sold 50,000 copies in just one month and Marie Corelli's *The Master-Christian* (1900) which sold 260,000 copies over the next few years, fed the late Victorian appetite for the articulation of a non-traditional, non-church instituted sense of morality.⁶⁶⁸ Corelli's *The Master-Christian* certainly fed such an appetite. Within this novel alone there are numerous portraits of Church corruption and decadence – most especially in the sensational form of sensual clergymen seducing young, innocent working-class women, and then abandoning them to misery, hardship and social ostracism, if not to suicide.⁶⁶⁹ Yet, an inescapably strong sense of Christian morality also directs the entire course of the story. As with her other works of fiction, a Christian sense of morality forms the cornerstone of Corelli's didacticism.

Popular forms of culture, such as novels and songs, and in this case especially hymns, often embodied Victorian and Edwardian attitudes towards religion and spirituality more effectively than anything else. As Harrison contends,

The strength of ideas and beliefs in a society cannot always be measured by the number of outward adherents. In late Victorian Britain, Christian assumptions and forms of thinking were deeply embedded in certain aspects of popular culture.⁶⁷⁰

David Hempton agrees, asserting more specifically that, if there was a common religion in England at all, it took the form of hymns.⁶⁷¹ Hymns remained a popular form of religious expression, providing common emotional satisfaction, even after their popularity peaked in the 1850s and 1860s, years when 400 collections appeared in England alone. And their appeal was diverse, as well as widespread. In illustration, Harrison claims that 'Abide With Me', a simple tune

⁶⁶⁸ Harrison, p. 125.

⁶⁶⁹ For example, see Marie Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, Methuen, London, 1900, p. 239 and pp. 389-392. These incidences are also referred to briefly in chapter 8 'Sexual Desire'.

⁶⁷⁰ Harrison, p. 116. Harrison includes Rites of Passage, such as baptisms and marriages, along with hymns and novels as aspects of popular culture.

⁶⁷¹ Hempton, p. 318.

with ‘elemental religious appeal’ about the fear of growing old and the need for comfort and help, had such huge appeal that it could be sung by thousands at public worship and Cup Final alike.⁶⁷² He adds that a popular hymn, such as this, could

Perhaps tell us more about the nature of belief than church leaders were prepared to recognise. The hymn struck a chord of sentimentality very dear to the Victorians and it implied no particular creed or dogma. It offered assurance where most needed, without making any demands.⁶⁷³

Popular religious-inspired songs can certainly be used to help shed light on common spiritual preoccupations of the period.

Hymns were part of an oral tradition that required neither money to possess nor literary skills to read, and so are indicative of the spiritual mentality of a wide cross-section of the population, including the working class. The sentiments contained in popular novels, on the other hand, are reflective of those of a more limited upper-working- and middle-class audience, and so are more specifically pertinent to the aims of this thesis.⁶⁷⁴

G. S. R. Kitson Clark points out that, during the Victorian era, much of the vast amount of reading matter that was published was specifically religious and reflective of the denominational plurality of England’s religious scene.⁶⁷⁵ With so much to read and to listen to on the subject of religion, it would be hard, he continues, for the general public not to pay attention to, or to unconsciously take in at least, the spiritual ideas that were constantly being put forward.⁶⁷⁶ Robert Lee Wolff agrees, adding that of all the subjects that ‘interested Victorians and

⁶⁷² ‘Abide With Me’ was written by the Reverend Henry Francis Lyle, the vicar of Brixham, Devon in 1847. (Harrison, p. 117.)

⁶⁷³ Harrison, p. 117.

⁶⁷⁴ See chapter 1 ‘A History of Women’s Emotions Using the Novels of Bennett and Corelli’ on the make-up of the general reading public.

⁶⁷⁵ G.S.R. Kitson Clark, *An Expanding Society, Britain 1830-1900*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1967, pp. 93-94.

⁶⁷⁶ Kitson Clark, p. 104.

therefore preoccupied their novelists, none – not love, or crime, or war, or sport, or ancestry, or even money – held their attention as much as religion.’⁶⁷⁷ This was especially so with popular novels, but not confined to them. As Kitson Clark argues:

it is in the cruder popular novelists that an image of the mass of the nineteenth-century reading public can be seen most clearly. They reflect its prudery, its snobbery, as in the novels of the ‘silver fork’ school, its love of melodrama, its religiosity and its emotionalism.⁶⁷⁸

Indeed, it can also be argued that moral instruction was very much an accepted role of many, even most, Victorian authors. The typical Victorian novelist regarded moral responsibility as an honoured duty. Anthony Trollope, for example, certainly did. He likened the role of the novelist to that of the clergy: the author, ‘if he have a conscience, must preach his sermons with the same purpose...and must have his own system of ethics.’⁶⁷⁹ Yet, he also recognised that authors of fiction had an advantage over clergymen – with the aid of stories and characters they could combine ‘entertainment and instruction’, they could ‘charm...[the] reader instead of wearying [them].’⁶⁸⁰ Although the literary scene was changing, there still remained, at the end of the nineteenth century, a substantial number of writers who continued to promote Trollope’s concept of the author. Marie Corelli was one of these.

Indeed Corelli’s constant espousals of Christian morality are offered as possible explanations for the phenomenal degree of popularity that she attained. John Lucas attempts to account for her bestselling success by claiming that ‘perhaps the nearest we can come to it is by noting the fact that her stories all have an element of sensationalism in them, plus a dose of vague mystical, other-or-ideal worldly

⁶⁷⁷ Robert Lee Wolff, *Gains and Losses. Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England*, John Murray, New York, 1977, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁷⁸ Kitson Clark, p. 93.

⁶⁷⁹ Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography*, Oxford University Press, London, 1953 [1883], p. 190.

⁶⁸⁰ Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study. A Social History of the English Novel, 1875-1914*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1989, p. 11; and Trollope, p. 190.

religion'.⁶⁸¹ Peter Keating uses similar terms to explain the popularity of one of her highest selling novels, *The Sorrows of Satan*:

it offered – in terms charged with high emotional power – to guide them safely through a world of frightening change. The religious message – that far from being 'dead', as so many late Victorians liked to proclaim him, God was vibrantly alive – was an important part of Corelli's appeal.⁶⁸²

Moreover, Corelli herself certainly believed that her novels provided what she claimed was 'a relief from the horrible "realities" of life that sicken and weary one's soul.'⁶⁸³ Undoubtedly, her relief was much sought after.

According to Margaret Maison, Corelli's constant sermonising and moralising brought 'zest, vitality, vision and imagination to Victorian religion at a time when it most needed them.'⁶⁸⁴ She goes on to say that

Queen Victoria, Gladstone, Tennyson, and Anglican and Catholic clergy alike, were quick to praise her colourful efforts to uphold the cause of Christianity in fiction at a time when it was fashionable to decry it, to write enthusiastically of the supernatural as a Christian rather than as a spiritualist or a theosophist, and to accept the findings of contemporary science as a confirmation rather than a denial of the divine order.⁶⁸⁵

⁶⁸¹ John Lucas, 'Marie Corelli', in James Vinson (ed.), *Great Writers of the English Language. Novelists and Prose Writers*, Macmillan Press, London and Basingstoke, 1979, pp. 281-283, p. 283.

⁶⁸² Peter Keating, 'Introduction', in Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan or The Strange Experience of One Geoffrey Tempest, Millionaire. A Romance*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1996, pp. ix-xx, p. xix.

⁶⁸³ Brian Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter. The Extraordinary Life of Marie Corelli*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1978, p. 3. Also referred to in chapter 1 'A History of Women's Emotions Using the Novels of Bennett and Corelli'.

⁶⁸⁴ Margaret M. Maison, *The Victorian Vision. Studies in the Religious Novel*, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1961, pp. 330-331.

⁶⁸⁵ Maison, pp. 330-331.

Corelli's highly popular fiction undoubtedly contributed to public debate. Moreover, this contribution also assumed a more tangible dimension in that prominent members of religious institutions quoted from her novels in order to promote their spiritual messages. Most notable of these was the Dean of Westminster who read from Corelli's *Barabbas* from the Abbey pulpit one Easter Sunday.⁶⁸⁶ Such weaving of popular culture and religious preaching surely helps to confirm that, far from being a disbelieving *fin de siècle*, turn-of-the-century society was one in which an interest in Christianity was clearly in evidence.

A prominent aspect of this pervasive Christian sense of morality was the idea that women were the more religious and, therefore, the more morally responsible of the sexes. This is certainly a viewpoint that Corelli's highly idealistic novels support, even if Bennett's more realist fiction does not. Hugh McLeod contends that the idea that women were the more religious sex dates back to the early eighteenth century. To a limited degree, this was supported by the fact that, in many Christian denominations, women's attendance at worship was higher than that of men.⁶⁸⁷ Using information derived from census material and from a variety of surveys, historians, such as McLeod, Harris and Brian Heeney, have shown that, with the notable exception of the Jewish faith, women worshippers outnumbered men – representing anywhere between 52 per cent and 66 per cent of the congregation.⁶⁸⁸ Furthermore, female participation in church-related voluntary

⁶⁸⁶ Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1979 [1932], p. 137. Leavis also cites another example: Father Ignatius (described as 'a prophet in his generation') preached on *The Sorrows of Satan* and the hall was packed, streams of private carriages discharging far more of Marie's readers than could be accommodated so that a similar sermon had to be delivered on the following Sunday. (Leavis, p. 137.)

⁶⁸⁷ McLeod, *Religion and Society in England*, p. 157.

⁶⁸⁸ McLeod writes that the 1902-3 census of London revealed that 61 per cent of church-goers aged 15 years old and over were female, whereas only 54 per cent of the population was female. In addition, he breaks these down into denominations. At the top of the scale were the Church of England with 66 per cent women and Roman Catholic with 64 per cent. The next group included Baptists with 60 per cent, Brethren and Presbyterian with 59 per cent, and Free Methodists, Congregationalists, Wesleyans, and the Salvation Army with 57 per cent women. Males were only slightly over-represented in Quaker and Primitive Methodist congregations with 52 per cent female participation each. At the end of the scale were Jewish services where only 22 per cent of those attending at synagogue were women. He also adds that a number of counts made in smaller towns in the years 1901-1906 produced similar results. (McLeod, *Religion and Society in England*, p. 67.) Brian Heeney argues that the proportion of active members of the Church of England in late

work was also very substantial. In the Church of England, for example, a large number of women devoted themselves to fulfilling an abundance of essential tasks, including 'district visiting, Sunday-School teaching, Church music, parochial clubs, missionary societies, study circles, rescue and representative agencies, besides the larger organizations represented by the sisterhoods and Deaconess Institutions, by the Girls' Friendly Society and the Mothers' Union'.⁶⁸⁹ Added to this also were the often unrecorded and unsung contributions of hundreds of wives, daughters and widows of clergymen.

Why did such a discrepancy exist between male and female religious participation? There are a variety of reasons offered as partial explanation – including the argument that women had more time to devote to religious observance; that childbirth, child-rearing and death associated with this area of life promoted religious contemplation; that men were too preoccupied in the public world of business to spend much time on spirituality; and the related notion that women existed mainly within the sheltered confines of the home, an environment removed from 'the pressures of materialism and competition' and so one that fostered a spiritual atmosphere.⁶⁹⁰ Of course, such factors apply only to women of the middle and upper classes and not to those working women from further down the social scale. McLeod, in particular, points this out, adding that the limited amount of free time that working women did manage to secure was also likely to be spent in pursuit of recreation – in enjoying the growing number of leisure

Victorian England seems to have been increasingly female. He also adds that public anxiety concerning this disproportionate representation of the sexes began to be apparent from about the 1880s. Heeney bases most of his findings on the results of two major religious surveys carried out in London by Charles Booth and the other by Richard Mudie-Smith. Booth managed to raise levels of public disconcertment with his discovery that 'the female sex forms the mainstay of every religious assembly of whatever class'. This feeling of collective anxiety was furthered with the publication of Mudie-Smith's survey of *The Religious Life of London* at the beginning of the twentieth century which claimed that nearly twice as many women as men attended Church of England services (the largest of England's many religious denominations at the time). (Brian Heeney, *The Women's Movement in the Church of England 1850 – 1930*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988, p. 6.) See also Harris, p. 155.

⁶⁸⁹ Heeney, p. 6.

⁶⁹⁰ See McLeod, *Religion and Society in England*, p. 157; and Harris, p. 179.

activities available during the period, especially in London, such as the music-halls and theatres.⁶⁹¹

Additionally, to help explain the existence of such a discrepancy, historians have also used the existence of the belief that women were supposed to possess superior moral qualities.⁶⁹² Gail Malmgreen argues that Victorian ideals ‘paid effusive homage to women’s higher spiritual nature’.⁶⁹³ She offers the view, prominent in the second half of the nineteenth century, that women were expected to be good Christians, whereas men were called on to be good citizens, as illustration of what she refers to as the increasing feminisation of religion both in England and in America.⁶⁹⁴ John Ruskin’s lecture, ‘Of Queens’ Gardens’, presented in 1865, certainly promotes such ideals. Ruskin spelt out the ideal moral responsibilities of women, explaining that her true function was to guide and uplift her more worldly and intellectual mate. He adds:

His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest, wherever war is just, wherever conquest is necessary. But then woman’s power is for rule, not for battle, – and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision.⁶⁹⁵

And although Corelli’s fiction deviates from this in that it often endorses feminine creative power, it still supports enough of Ruskin’s ideal to illustrate that such gender distinctions were in wide circulation even in the early years of the twentieth century.

⁶⁹¹ McLeod argues that London had more such leisure activities on offer in contrast, for example, to the North of England where pubs were sometimes the only social alternatives available. (McLeod, *Religion and Society in England*, p. 67-70.)

⁶⁹² McLeod, *Religion and Society in England*, p. 157.

⁶⁹³ Malmgreen, p. 7.

⁶⁹⁴ Malmgreen, p. 2.

⁶⁹⁵ John Ruskin, Lecture II: ‘Of Queens’ Gardens’, in *Sesame and Lilies: The Two Paths: & The King of the Golden River*, Dent, London, 1970, p. 59.

Furthermore, religious institutions themselves often endorsed this idea of greater female religiousness and moral responsibility. For example, McLeod contends that, even though it was not an official doctrine of their particular teaching, Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism and, to a lesser extent, mainstream Nonconformism, often supported the view that the chief moral responsibility for the nation's health lay in the female realm. With specific reference to the Church of England, Heeney argues that the doctrine of female subordination to the male sex had assumed a theological, indeed, a Biblical form. This establishment, he maintains, was seen as 'as a guardian of basic anti-feminist doctrine rooted in the Pentateuch and enshrined in the Pauline epistles'.⁶⁹⁶ He further refers to the 'creation myth' in Genesis, where woman was created from man, which was commonly invoked by religious personages to enforce the suggestion that a woman's proper role was to act as man's helpmate.⁶⁹⁷ He claims that Church of England congregations were generally regarded as 'largely uncritical or traditionalist' and so were not unreceptive to such preaching.⁶⁹⁸ Therefore, the image of women principally as church-goers retained its hold at the turn of the twentieth century, despite several denominations opening their offices to them.⁶⁹⁹

It cannot be said, then, that feminism had much impact on prevailing notions about such gender distinctions. True, there was little chance of Late Victorian and Edwardian feminists gaining a foothold within establishments like the Church of England, and therefore, there was little opportunity of challenging this philosophy of male supremacy. But, even so, there is not much evidence indicating that this was even included among their main aims. In fact, historians such as Harris and

⁶⁹⁶ Heeney, p. 6. Bédarida agrees that this idea of masculine superiority was certainly a part of Christian tradition and that the famous Pauline precepts were used to justify it; but he also adds that the attitudes of agnostics towards this issue were no different, so enshrined in society was this view. (Bédarida, p. 119.)

⁶⁹⁷ Heeney quotes J. W. Burgon, a prominent High Churchman, and Bishop Christopher Wordsworth of Lincoln, both speaking in 1884, and both forcefully subscribing to this doctrine of male superiority. Heeney also quotes from Charlotte Yonge's *Womankind* (1876) which also affirmed her belief in women's natural inferiority. (Heeney, p. 7.)

⁶⁹⁸ Heeney, p. 6.

⁶⁹⁹ Denominations such as the Salvation Army, Quakers and Primitive Methodists. (McLeod, *Religion and Society in England*, p. 68.)

Bédarida comment that the efforts of the predominantly moderate feminists of the Late Victorian period were ‘imbued with the influence of religion’ – that they ‘rooted their campaigns for purity, temperance, and sexual equality in orthodox Christian doctrine’.⁷⁰⁰ Moreover, even if these women had wanted to question this viewpoint, given the moral climate of the time, there is little to indicate that they would have been well-received. This ‘double standard’, inherent in much of the nation’s religious teaching, reflected its continuing existence in wider society.



To reiterate a point made earlier, religious faith assumes only a modest proportion of Arnold Bennett’s middlebrow fiction. A more individually-centred notion of morality is always present in the lives of his characters, thereby colouring most of his narratives. But direct references to religious belief itself are few. When Bennett does broach the subject, however, his observations are insightful. For the most part, this involvement is confined to detailing periods of religious crisis in the lives of two of his prominent female characters, Hilda Lessways and Anna Tellwright, although a third character, Sophia Baines, is drawn into a discussion of religion, but only momentarily. What analyses of these pivotal episodes reveal is that the expectation that women have, or should have, a special relationship with spirituality was still alive at the turn of the twentieth century – even among women who were experiencing difficulty fulfilling such notions. Moreover, the fact that it is to the spiritual sphere that both Hilda Lessways and Sophia Baines turn in the first instance in times of personal trauma, anticipating spiritual consolation, helps to support the viability of the notion that religion was still pervasive during the period. In addition, Bennett’s treatment of religious uncertainty draws attention to the degree of tension existing between the choice of following the teaching of a particular denomination, or even believing at all, and that of relying on an individual sense of responsibility for one’s own earthly salvation. Furthermore,

⁷⁰⁰ Bédarida, p. 117; and Harris, p. 166. Malmgreen adds that most English feminists were not looking to get rid of religion, only to purge it of ‘oppressive accretions of centuries of patriarchal

the particular stories of Hilda Lessways and Anna Tellwright cast some light on the perceived differences between male and female approaches to spiritual issues. Bennett never implies that men are not religious, but his novels do support the argument that their typical place in the more external world of business, for example, does enable them to adopt a more pragmatic, even more rational, much less introspective approach to spiritual belief than the frequently home-centred women in their lives.

The circumstances surrounding Hilda Lessways' and Sophia Baines' initial decisions to turn to religion are presented as being particularly pertinent to women, especially daughters. Both of these women experience difficulties delivering the level of filial duty expected of them. As a result of their emotional turmoil, each optimistically resorts to religious belief in search of consolation, if not complete peace of mind. These women turn inwards, towards the interior realm of spirituality, because there are few, if any more external outlets for purging these emotions open to them. At least as far as daughters were concerned, filial duty was such a well-guarded nineteenth-century ideal, moreover an ideal that carried Biblical endorsement (through the Commandments), that there were few opportunities of publicly challenging, or even discussing it.

Little is said of Sophia Baines' decision to seek religious consolation. Little insight is given into her emotions at the time. All that Bennett tells his readers is that she abandons her watch over her invalid father – who dies shortly afterwards – in favour of flirting with Gerald Scales, a travelling salesman who intermittently visits the family shop. Following this tragic incident, Sophia quits her training as a teacher, resumes her loathed position in the shop and, while living in self-imposed 'shame', 'takes to religion'.⁷⁰¹ However, with the exception of this episode, religion is not pivotal to Sophia's life. After eloping with Scales almost two years later, no direct mention is ever made of religion again. Considering this, as well as

misinterpretation; hence the 'new woman' was often a new religionist'. (Malmgreen, p. 6.)

Bennett's use of an almost casual tone when stating that Sophia turns to religion, it appears that seeking spiritual assurance during a time of emotional upheaval is hardly to be regarded as unusual – especially when the person involved is female.

However, in contrast to Bennett's handling of Sophia's spiritual crisis, Hilda Lessways' involvement with religious belief is given much more attention. Hilda, Bennett's 'new woman', secures a clerical position that she greatly covets in a local Five Towns newspaper office. She proudly and completely immerses herself in her newly acquired occupation. So, when a telegram arrives informing her that her widowed mother is ill in London, she hesitates. Instead of rushing to her mother's side, she lingers at the office in order to witness the launching of the first edition of the newspaper. It is not until the early hours of the next morning that she realises how 'monstrous' her decision was. All pleasure derived from 'sacrificing her formal duty as daughter to her duty as clerk' is completely lost.⁷⁰² When Hilda arrives in London she discovers that her mother has already died.

As a result of her dilemma over duty to her mother and duty to her job, Hilda suffers what can only be described as a nervous breakdown induced by feelings of guilt. She never again resumes her work as a clerk and so, without the benefit of daily distraction, she increasingly occupies her mind with thoughts about what she regards as her momentous decision. In all likelihood, men in a similar position to Hilda's would not have experienced the same dilemma or, following that, a guilt-induced breakdown. Men were expected to pursue a career. They were not expected to have to choose between that and dedication to family. Above all else, it was still widely anticipated at this time, however, that middle-class women would fulfil familial obligations. This explains why Hilda perceives her delay in reaching her mother as an act of selfishness – a degree of selfishness that is only heightened by awareness of the fact that she does not work from financial need but from an ardent desire to do something different with her life. Religion, then,

⁷⁰¹ Arnold Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, Edinburgh, n.d. [1908], p. 95.

seems to her to be the only solution to a moral quandary that she knows will not be appeased elsewhere.

Bennett explains that:

After several weeks [of her breakdown] she had naturally begun to think of religion; for the malady alone was proof enough that she had a profoundly religious nature.⁷⁰³

Internalising the whole question of right and wrong, examining the rules and the priorities that govern her life, is solid proof of Hilda's profoundly religious nature in Bennett's mind. He does not need evidence of formal religious observance to convince him of this – a factor that signifies that religiousness in the form of obedience to an inner concept of spirituality means more to him than more external signs of religious practice. And as we have seen, this was a viewpoint that was gaining increasing popularity as the Victorian era drew to a close.

Hilda's emotional problems are only accentuated when she finds that she cannot believe. Bennett informs his readers that church services have never moved her, but even now, in her emotionally darkest hour when she craves spiritual assistance, she still cannot be moved. She listens, with hope, to a sermon where the preacher explains the emotional quality of 'real belief'. Yet, even though she agrees with his definition of 'real belief', in fact it is because she agrees with it, she knows that all hope is lost to her. Such faith is impossible for her:

She could never say, with joyous fervour: 'I believe!' At best she could only assert that she did not disbelieve – and was she so sure even of that? No! Belief had been denied to her; and to dream of consolation from religion was sentimentally womanish; even in her indifference she

⁷⁰² Arnold Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1976 [1911], p. 99.

⁷⁰³ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 117.

preferred straightforward, honest damnation to the soft self-deceptions of feminine religiosity.⁷⁰⁴

She, then, wishes that she was a Roman Catholic:

genuine and convinced – with what ardour she would have cast herself down before the confessional, and whispered her sinfulness to the mysterious face within; and with what ecstasy would she have received the absolution – that cleansing bath of the soul!⁷⁰⁵

However, ‘the exterior common sense of the situation’ intervenes and Hilda comes to the full realisation that she is not a Roman Catholic and that she could no more become one than she could become ‘the queen of some romantic Latin country of palaces and cathedrals’.⁷⁰⁶

This passage corresponds well with Edwardian discussions of spirituality by elevating a preference for indifference to formal notions of religious belief over seemingly superficial religious observance, especially on the part of women. Hilda is clearly aware of the popular perception of the spiritual realm as a particularly important sphere for women – whether what this sphere has to offer is genuine or not. Indeed, such awareness helps to account for why she turns to the church in the first place. But, she soon finds that this situation does not appeal to her. As a woman, she takes pride in denouncing religiosity – the spiritual dishonesty and self-deception that she believes plays a role in the lives of a significant number of women and that is commonly coupled with femininity during the period. As an intelligent, rational and self-aware being, she scorns religiosity dressed up as true faith. She knows that a fundamental difference exists between true faith, including the knowledge that God exists, and spiritual consolation, the peace of mind that is artificially extracted from church teachings and that is willed into being without deeply pondering or analysing what belief really means. When faith is finally denied to her, Hilda turns away from

⁷⁰⁴ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, pp. 117-118.

⁷⁰⁵ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 118.

denominational belief to an individual sense of morality to guide her. In this way, her decision to do so resonates in a turn-of-the-century society that was experiencing a general shift in a similar direction – a shift that late twentieth century historians have identified, but doubtless one of which Hilda herself would have been unaware.

Unlike Hilda's crisis of faith, Anna Tellwright's is initially sparked by religious contemplation itself, not by trauma concerning fulfilment of filial duty – although, such trauma is never far from the surface of Anna's life either. Intricately involved in the Wesleyan community of her town (as a Sunday School teacher), and furthermore, plunged into Revivalist activities, Anna discovers that she is uncertain of the extent of her faith. Anna never achieves the individual conversion expected by her denomination. However, similar to Hilda, the very fact that she agonises over this question of religious belief confirms her sense of its immense importance.

Bennett affirms that, according to the most basic understanding of the word, Anna believes. She believes in God's existence. Moreover, she believes in the teaching that Jesus died on the cross to save her mortal soul to such an extent that Bennett argues that she was 'probably unaware that any person in Christendom had doubted that fact so fundamental to her'.⁷⁰⁷ However, by not being able to experience conversion and 'profess Christ', Anna becomes aware of the fact that, technically, she is a 'lost creature'.⁷⁰⁸ Consequently, she subjects her attitude to faith to careful examination, asking herself:

What, then, was lacking? What was belief? What was faith?⁷⁰⁹

Resulting feelings of guilt and shame proceed to cast an inescapable shadow over her life and she finds herself in the midst of the 'profoundest misery':

⁷⁰⁶ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 118.

⁷⁰⁷ Arnold Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, Wordsworth Classics, Hertfordshire, 1994 [1902], p. 45.

⁷⁰⁸ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 45.

The weight of her sins, of her ingratitude to God, lay on her like a physical and intolerable load, and she lost all feeling of shame, as a sea-sick voyager loses shame after an hour of nausea. She knew then that she could no longer go on living as aforetime.⁷¹⁰

The material conditions surrounding the expected course of her conversion only add to the anxiety experienced by this normally quite introverted young woman. As Bennett points out, attending the Revivalist meetings and placing herself in a position of public scrutiny and perhaps even confrontation (unwelcome attention is drawn to her in one instance, for example, when she is, unsuccessfully, requested to lead the gathering in a prayer), causes her extreme discomfort and agitation. Her despair is heightened by 'the sense of sin' she feels, but the equally strong sense accompanying this 'of being confused' and anticipation of being 'publicly shamed' also amplify it.⁷¹¹

And yet, Anna's life is far from being irreligious. Indeed, she is one of Bennett's most profoundly and most consistently spiritual characters. At the very beginning of the novel, readers are presented with a portrait of Anna that draws on the spiritual dimension of her physical appearance – an appearance metaphorically monastic. Her face, Bennett writes,

seemed a face for the cloister, austere in contour, fervent in expression, the severity of it mollified by that resigned and spiritual melancholy peculiar to women who through the error of destiny have been born into a wrong environment.⁷¹²

Christianity moulds Anna's entire being. Inherently Christian values perpetually guide her everyday existence – values including responsibility for others, duty and

⁷⁰⁹ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 45.

⁷¹⁰ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 45.

⁷¹¹ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 44.

⁷¹² Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 4.

self-sacrifice, as well as an overall sense of conscientiousness.⁷¹³ Religion is never far from her mind. She cannot even conduct the business affairs that her father has placed upon her shoulders without inwardly referring to the Bible or asking herself if Christ would have done things this way.⁷¹⁴ Moreover, so strong is her desire to be 'true' that she even subjects her usual role as a Sunday School teacher to rigorous questioning:

Why did she teach? Not from the impulse of religious zeal. Why was she allowed to have charge of a class of immortal souls? The blind could not lead the blind, nor the lost save the lost. These considerations troubled her. Conscience pricked, accusing her of a continual pretence.⁷¹⁵

Religion even interferes with Anna's other great preoccupation, domesticity.⁷¹⁶ So obsessive is her concern with possessing a prescribed form of religious faith that it leads her, uncharacteristically, to forget her household and filial duties. The resulting 'domestic upheavals' and subsequent worry about whether or not she is now guilty of placing domestic concerns over the ultimate fate of her soul only serves to increase the extent of her spiritual anxiety.⁷¹⁷

Both Hilda Lessways and Anna Tellwright turn to institutional religion seeking some form of consolation, and both become vexed over what they subsequently discover concerning the solidity and extent of their spiritual beliefs. However, Bennett does not deem them to be irreligious – even if, as with Hilda, they display a degree of indifference to the form of faith that religious institutions offer. Rather he strongly asserts the potency of their inherently spiritual natures. So, with the

⁷¹³ Close to the beginning of the novel, Bennett claims that Anna 'had never looked beyond the horizons of her present world, but had sought spiritual satisfaction in the ideas of duty and sacrifice'. (Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 18.) By the book's end, once it is decided that she will marry Mynors, her duty shifts to her husband; she experiences 'the tonic sensation of high resolves to be a worthy wife'. (Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, pp. 129-130.)

⁷¹⁴ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, pp. 58-59.

⁷¹⁵ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 35.

⁷¹⁶ See chapter 5 'The Business of Domesticity' for a detailed discussion of Anna's involvement with domesticity.

⁷¹⁷ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 53.

stories of each of these young women, this popular middlebrow author illustrates a shift away from religiousness as defined by a specific concept of institutional faith, towards a more general, more pervasive notion of Christian morality, rooted in personal commitment. And again, unlike contemporary social commentators, including Bennett and Corelli, and late twentieth-century historians possessing the benefit of hindsight, this is a wider shift of which these individual young women are likely to be unaware.

The fact that the men in both Anna's and Hilda's lives are instrumental in the easing of their spiritual quandaries is revealing of the perceived gap existing between male and female perceptions of and approaches to religion. Hilda and Anna have high expectations of religion. Anna, for example,

dreamed impossibly of a high spirituality which should metamorphose all, change her life, lend glamour to the most pitiful surroundings, ennoble the most ignominious burdens – a spirituality never to be hers.⁷¹⁸

And, like Hilda, she turns to organised religion in search of this state of mind – the actual existence of churches, clergymen, services and sermons giving a material reality to what is, for many, intangible, inexplicable and often mystifying. However, neither woman achieves their desired form of relief from this source. Instead, they find it in the assurances of Henry Mynors and Edwin Clayhanger.

Henry Mynors expresses concern for Anna's spiritual wellbeing. When he becomes aware of her anxiety, he attempts to console her, to give her solace. He points out that she may be expecting too much from the Revivalist meetings that he helps to organise:

I – we – cannot promise you any sudden change of feeling, any sudden relief and certainty, such as some people experience it. At least, I never had it. What is called

⁷¹⁸ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 48.

conversion can happen in various ways. It is a question of living, of constant endeavour, with the example of Christ always before us. It need not always be a sudden wrench, you know, from the world.⁷¹⁹

These well-timed words advise Anna that she no longer needs to feel the pressure to experience ‘an impossible violent spiritual metamorphosis’. Mynors had revealed to her an avenue of release from a situation which had seemed on all sides fatally closed. She sprang eagerly towards it. She realized afresh how frightful was the dilemma from which there was now a hope of escape, and she was grateful accordingly.⁷²⁰

Subsequently, she shifts her emphasis from immediate conversion to a slow and gradual journey where the ultimate destination is ‘the state of being saved’.

Peace of mind for Hilda only arrives when she meets Edwin Clayhanger. At a social gathering at the Orgreaves household, attended by both, Edwin claims,

‘You can’t help what you believe. You can’t make yourself believe anything. And I don’t see why you should, either. There’s no virtue in believing.’⁷²¹

Hilda is amazed by the effect on her of these words. More than that, she finds herself ‘thunderstruck’:

She was blinded as though by a mystic revelation. She wanted to exult, and to exult with all the ardour of her soul. This truth which Edwin Clayhanger had enunciated she had indeed always been vaguely aware of; but now in a flash she felt it, she faced it, she throbbed to its authenticity, and was free... ‘There’s no virtue in believing.’ It was fundamental. It was the gift of life and

⁷¹⁹ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 56.

⁷²⁰ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 57.

⁷²¹ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 151.

peace...Never would she forget the instant and the scene –
scene of her re-birth!⁷²²

As with Anna, Hilda's spiritual awakening as such is sparked by the words of a man.

With these examples, Bennett draws fairly definite distinctions between the religious experiences of men and those of women. The sphere of religion was commonly espoused to belong to women, yet neither Anna nor Hilda find themselves able to exert any amount of control over it. Before receiving relief for her tortured mind, for example, Anna Tellwright views, with a mixture of admiration and jealousy, Mynors's unencumbered existence – his ease of being, his religious earnestness, his 'goodness' and 'dignity'. She envied him:

She envied every man. Even in the sphere of religion, men were not fettered like women. No man, she thought, would acquiesce in the futility to which she had already half resigned; a man would either wring salvation from the heavenly powers or race gloriously to hell.⁷²³

Explanation for this discrepancy between male and female reactions could well lie with the fact that neither Henry nor Edwin find themselves in the midst of any real emotional turmoil and so, religion does not present itself as a essential or even desirable refuge. Their distance from emotional and spiritual turmoil enables them to discern a clear path of escape – to rationalise Hilda's and Anna's predicaments, thereby presenting them each with a much desired resolution. Another more general explanation, however, is that Late Victorian and Edwardian men were not under the same pressure as their female counterparts to acknowledge any kind of special relationship with the spiritual realm. Neither Henry nor Edwin, for

⁷²² Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 151.

⁷²³ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 48.

example, feel the need to prove their piety either to themselves or to society in general – nor, Bennett’s fiction implies, are they expected to do so.⁷²⁴



Christian references and allusions abound in Corelli’s texts. Even before opening her books, readers are likely to be met with a religiously inspired title, such as *The Master-Christian*, *The Sorrows of Satan*, *Barabbas*, or *The Life Everlasting*. However, as has been previously argued, the spiritual content of Corelli’s novels is not motivated by an allegiance to a specific religious denomination, but rather by a zealous regard for a more pervasive notion of Christianity. Therefore, it is a general turn-of-the-century concept of Christianity as well as a heavy dose of Victorian idealism that directs much of what Corelli has to say on the subject of women, and not the teachings of any particular church.

The most important demand that Corelli’s novels make of women is that they be highly spiritual. Only women who possess religious faith are ‘true’ women. Women who doubt, on the other hand, are ‘unsexed’. There is absolutely no room for them within Corelli’s conception of womanhood. Her idea that spiritual faith is vital to femininity, however, was not unique – as has been argued, it resonated in a turn-of-the-century society that continued to hold on to the belief that women were the superior moral and more religious sex. What Corelli’s books do demonstrate, though, is that such an idea ran the risk of clashing with the equally pervasive ideal of male supremacy.

The tension existing between attempting to adhere to two such prominent, sometimes opposing notions is expressed through the many obvious instances of inconsistent, even contradictory, remarks contained within this bestselling literature. For example, it is a general rule that the ‘good’ female protagonists in

⁷²⁴ Bennett states that, later that evening, Hilda and Edwin ‘talked a little about the mere worry of these religious questions [those concerning free thought and so on]. He protested that they never

Corelli's fiction are inherently spiritual. Furthermore, these females are always presented as intelligent, often career-minded women (in the sense that they are artists or writers – to Corelli, acceptable forms of feminine employment).⁷²⁵ They are certainly portrayed as women who are capable of independent thought. However, the sense of superiority that these female characters possess belongs solely within the very private, internal realm. Superiority in the more active, more public sphere undoubtedly belongs to men – a factor that cancels out the notion of women owning any 'real' or tangible form of supremacy. For instance, Angela in Corelli's *The Master-Christian* at first looks to her fiancé as her superior, then upon discovering his rogue qualities shows every promise of transferring her admiration to the new love of her life, Cyrillon Verginaud (her soul-mate); Mavis Clare from *The Sorrows of Satan* is single and so looks to God as her superior; and the female narrator of *The Life Everlasting* finds in Rafael Santoris (her soul-mate) and in Aselzion, the leader of a religious sect and Santoris's teacher, spiritual masters.⁷²⁶ In each case, these intelligent, seemingly independent women find themselves pouring all their efforts into supporting the moral aspirations of the men in their lives. Their own integrity and inherent spirituality are solidly assured, but they still appear as something of appendages to their outwardly superior menfolk. Women, then, are directed to be morally superior but they are not presented with any opportunity of demonstrating or practising this superiority. Ultimately, they are only destined to perform the role of helpmate in the outside world. Undoubtedly, the ambiguities concerning male and female supremacy that Corelli's narratives often reveal echo a sense of uncertainty that exists in a wider society – one that was witnessing significant changes concerning both the place of women and that of religion.

worried him, and reaffirmed his original proposition.' (Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 157.)

⁷²⁵ For a discussion of Corelli's attitude towards suitable careers for middle-class women, see chapter 4 'Employment and Careers'.

⁷²⁶ Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, for instance, pp. 590-594; Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan or The Strange Experience of One Geoffrey Tempest, Millionaire. A Romance*, Methuen, London, 1895, for example, see pp. 347-348; and Marie Corelli, *The Life Everlasting. A Reality of Romance*, Methuen, London, 1911, especially p. 311.

Corelli's regard for Christianity does not preclude her from approaching religion in the same sensational way that she does all other important or topical themes of the day. In spite of the obvious fact that she uses widespread support of the continuing existence of spiritual belief to help sell her books, she frequently announces that, for most, religion is dead. She asserts that this is in line with the modern trend to follow 'the chief theme of nearly all the social teachings of the time' – a 'complete contempt of life and disbelief in a God'.⁷²⁷ Given the prevailing moral climate at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, it is apparent that it is especially shocking for a woman to express religious doubt or disbelief. Therefore, despite her persistent claims that women are inherently spiritual and her 'unsexing' of those who do not conform to this aspect of her feminine idealisation, Corelli allows herself and her readers to indulge in scandalous depictions of female anomalies. These deviant women not only help to entertain her vast audience, but also assist her in further clarifying her ideal of femininity.

Corelli calls on the well-known stereotype of the New Woman in order to demonstrate the unwomanly offensiveness of disbelieving women. For example, through the aristocratic eyes of the carousing Sir Charles Lascelles (*The Mighty Atom*), she ridicules the 'ugly 'advanced' young women who have brought their bicycles [to a castle he is visiting] and go tearing about the country all day'.⁷²⁸ No doubt these young women have close connections with the unnamed woman Corelli refers to as:

one such Christ-scorning female, with short hair and spectacles, who had taken high honours at Girton, and who was eminently fitted to become the mother of a brood of atheists, who, like human cormorants, would be prepared to swallow benefits, and deny the Benefactor.⁷²⁹

⁷²⁷ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 203.

⁷²⁸ Marie Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, Methuen, London, 1912 [1896], p. 17.

⁷²⁹ Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, p. 104.

Corelli equates the growing number of educational opportunities for women with what she perceives to be a rising number of female sceptics. Conveniently ignoring the fact that the majority of the period's moderate feminists based much of their philosophy in Christianity, Corelli indignantly states that female advancement should not be sought to the detriment of religion:

Women especially, who, but for Christianity, would still be in the low place of bondage and humiliation formerly assigned to them in the barbaric periods, are most of all to be reproached for their wicked and wanton attacks upon their great Emancipator, who pitied and pardoned their weaknesses as they had never been pitied or pardoned before.⁷³⁰

Women should embrace Christianity and show just gratitude to its civilising effects. Deviating from it, as Corelli asserts New Women do, deserves the severest rebuke. Tertiary education, mannish appearance, bad eyesight and atheism all combine to form an image of womanhood that would in no way appeal to Corelli's wide audience as either idyllic or desirable.

There are numerous individual instances of disbelieving women in Corelli's novels – women who all receive a just fate in line with their attitude towards religion. Mrs Valliscourt, in *The Mighty Atom*, declares that her cruelly atheistic husband has robbed her of 'God, of hope, of every sense of duty', thereby killing 'every womanly sentiment' in her.⁷³¹ Knowing her reasons and her inevitable plight, readers are invited to extend some degree of sympathy towards this tragic and pathetic figure. But the fact remains that, given her lack of faith as well as her sexual dissidence (she abandons her son to have a temporary sexual liaison with another of Corelli's decadent aristocrats), she must be sentenced to eternal damnation. Judith Iscariot, the 'fallen woman' in *Barabbas*, similarly combines sexual deviance with a lack of true belief. Judith, Judas Iscariot's imagined sister,

⁷³⁰ Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, p. 104.

⁷³¹ Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, p. 137. Also discussed in chapter 8 'Sexual Desire'.

has a long-running affair with a married man – a High Priest. And although she considers her family's religion to be important – readers are told, after all, that she persuades her brother to betray Jesus in the hope that Judas will return to the family faith – she is not Christian. (Religious denomination is not important in Corelli's fiction, unless it is used to distinguish the acceptability of Christian belief from intolerance of non-Christian belief, such as the Jewish faith.) It is only at the end of the novel that Judith reveals herself as a new follower of Christ. Such Christian enlightenment, although it comes too late to save her from death, may save her from eternal damnation. Corelli admits that she does not know where Judith's soul is bound – whether to Heaven or to Hell.⁷³²

Lady Sibyl, in *The Sorrows of Satan*, is perhaps more spiritually dissolute than any of these other female characters. And it is through her that we are given an insight, not only into the likely source of female doubt, but also into the relationship between gender idealisation and religious belief. *The Sorrows of Satan* declares that too much worldly knowledge, and by inference sexual knowledge, robs women of the religious faith that is rightfully theirs. And all too often the source of this corruption is literature – whether through the works of the Norwegian dramatist, Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), the English poet, Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909) or the numerous New Women writers of the era. Moreover, fashionable society and the many vices it harbours are also targeted as a root of disbelief and soul corruption.⁷³³ Still, literature is not all bad – as Corelli's highly moral, enormously popular novels testify. Fiction performs a dual role in Lady Sibyl's life. It both corrupts and it offers salvation. The books of Mavis Clare, the model of pure womanhood and writer of some genius in the novel, are presented as something of a temporary antidote to Sibyl's decadence and disbelief. As Sibyl explains to her 'lover', Geoffrey Tempest:

⁷³² Marie Corelli, *Barabbas. A Dream of The World's Tragedy*, Methuen, London, 1907, p. 454. Again, this issue is also discussed in chapter 8 'Sexual Desire'.

⁷³³ For example, see Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, pp. 201-202, for Lady Sibyl's description of the effects of 'pernicious' literature on both her mind and soul.

for a time her books give me back my self-respect, and make me see humanity in a nobler light, – because she restores to me, if only for an hour, a kind of glimmering belief in God, so that my mind feels refreshed and cleansed.⁷³⁴

But, importantly, this relief is only temporary. Once she stops reading Mavis Clare's books, she allows herself to once again wallow in the fashionable and intellectual climate of cynicism and disbelief. The weight and force of corrupting literature is too much even for the extraordinary but lone Mavis Clare to challenge effectively. Moreover, once Lady Sibyl's innocence is lost, it cannot be retrieved. Knowledge, especially sexual knowledge, once attained cannot be forgotten. Although she sometimes struggles unsuccessfully to regain her faith, Lady Sibyl is not saved. Disbelief, combined with the sensational act of offering herself sexually to Satan, in disguise as the charming Prince Lucio, secures her damnation.

With these examples, Corelli asserts that women should be inherently religious, but she struggles to adequately explain why. Geoffrey Tempest, even though he too is a member of the fashionably cynical society in which Lady Sibyl moves, cannot help but expect women to be morally superior. When this beautiful woman reveals herself to be a disbeliever, he cannot avoid feeling shocked. His initial reaction, Corelli recounts, was to gaze at her with a mixture of 'worship and disillusion, even as a barbarian might gaze at an idol whom he still loved, but whom he could no longer believe in as divine.'⁷³⁵ He continues:

I had involuntarily clung to the old-fashioned idea that religious faith was a sacred duty in womanhood; I was not able to offer any reason for this notion, unless it was the romantic fancy of having a good woman to pray for one, if one had no time and less inclination to pray for one's self.

⁷³⁴ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 202.

⁷³⁵ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 203.

However, it was evident Sibyl was “advanced” enough to do without superstitious observances; *she* would never pray for me; – and if we had children, she would never teach them to make their first tender appeals to Heaven for my sake or hers.⁷³⁶

Neither Corelli nor Tempest can offer any pragmatic reason why they should so tightly hold on to these ‘angel in the house’ notions – except, perhaps, to reiterate the sentiments noted by John Ruskin that it is a woman’s sacred duty to redeem the man in her life. As Satan himself, in the form of Prince Lucio, argues, ‘[o]nly a pure woman can make faith possible to a man’.⁷³⁷ But, how can women offer men moral and spiritual salvation if they themselves are neither moral nor spiritual? How can men idealise women and look on them as almost divine beings if women themselves do not believe in divinity? It simply stands that the double standard as it concerns moral responsibility continues to prevail – in Corelli’s bestselling fiction as in turn-of-the-century society itself.



Although acceptance of religious doubt or at least religious indifference was growing by the turn of the twentieth century, it was by no means universally accepted or viewed as in any way desirable. This was especially so with regard to women. Social and economic changes combined to affect the position of middle-class women in Late Victorian and Edwardian England, but idealistic expectations continued to prevail. Depiction of the extent to which these expectations continued to hold sway over society, however, differs between Bennett and Corelli. Corelli’s texts argue that female religious and moral superiority was still as important as it was seen to be during the mid-Victorian years, even though the middle-class ideal of sheltering women within the secure confines of the home came to be increasingly under attack. Bennett’s fictional realism, on the other

⁷³⁶ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 203. Tempest voices this desire again in p. 211 and p. 275.

⁷³⁷ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 349.

hand, suggests the existence of a much more complex relationship between women and religious faith. His novels acknowledge that women were still expected to possess a special connection with the spiritual realm, but allow that it was not always possible to realise this. Bennett presents religion as an acceptable outlet for emotional concerns. But, its reputation as a specifically female concern is due simply to the fact that turn-of-the-century women have fewer more tangible outlets for channelling their emotional energy than men have. In contrast to men who participated widely in the public realm of employment, middle-class women were still largely confined to the more private domestic sphere – and to a world of interiority. However, whether advocating moral idealism or promoting literary realism, the novels of both of these popular authors do agree that women were by no means excluded from being caught up in the growing trend at the turn of the twentieth century of placing greater value on a general sense of Christian morality and of ‘good’ living, than on denominational faith.

Section D

Romantic Relationships

Chapter 7 ‘Romantic Love’ and chapter 8 ‘Sexual Desire’ discuss what Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli’s novels reveal about unmarried middle-class women and their thoughts about and experiences of romantic relationships. True to what has been argued about other aspects of life in the earlier sections of the thesis, a highly significant proportion of Late Victorian and Edwardian attitudes towards love and sex revolved around accepted notions of gender. Indeed, if anything, these novels strongly suggest that such concepts were even more pertinent to this audience’s opinions on romantic relationships than on any other aspect of middle-class life. In line with this, then, substantial amounts of the following chapters are dedicated to discussing notions of femininity and masculinity as they are interpreted in some of the era’s popular fiction.

However, Bennett and Corelli’s contributions to this area of historical inquiry are treated separately in this section, mirroring the fact that each deals with this topic in very different ways. So, whereas Bennett tends to write about the ‘gaps’ that frequently exist between idealised notions of love and gender and the inevitable ‘reality’ of such experiences, Corelli prefers to concentrate on defending romantic idealisation by offering unwavering support to the view that such concepts continue to have a valuable, even essential, role to play in a transforming turn-of-the-century society. Still, despite their many differences, it is evident that each writer’s fiction contributes to the reconstruction of Late Victorian and Edwardian *mentalité* as it concerns love and sexual desire.

In chapters 7 and 8, actual experiences of romantic relationships are analysed in order to investigate the discrepancies existing between the idealisation of love and its more common everyday manifestation. Given the social and moral climate of the era, courtship and marriage were the only accepted means of exploring romantic love and sexual desire. This means that, even in a thesis concerning the

lives of single women, examples from the early periods of marriage are frequently called on to help demonstrate the effects on the minds of middle-class women of ideal notions and of actual experiences of love and sex. Furthermore, this section also delves briefly into what men in Bennett and Corelli's novels thought about this aspect of everyday life. As has been said, notions of femininity and masculinity were intrinsic to turn-of-the-century attitudes about love and sex – each often played off the other, thereby helping individual male and female characters to define the one or the other. Therefore, attention given to men's thoughts, however limited, assists historians in attempting to build up a more comprehensive image of women's roles in relationships during the period.

And finally, before moving to the chapters themselves, a quick word about the historical publications referred to in this section of the thesis. More secondary material is available for the purpose of understanding attitudes towards sex at the turn of the twentieth century than towards love. Chapters 7 and 8 reflect this, with fewer historians referred to in chapter 7 than in chapter 8. Still, what is largely absent, whether in the area of romantic love or sexual desire, is an analysis of historical interiority – of insight into the likely thoughts and attitudes of the general reading public regarding such an everyday, though intensely personal and private, concern.

Chapter 7

Romantic Love

Few documents exist that give historians of the Late Victorian and Edwardian years a substantial insight into what ‘ordinary’ women thought about romantic relationships. Turn of the century novels, which tend to centre much of their discussions on this subject, represent a way into such a private issue. Depending on the kind of fiction, whether realistic or escapist, for example, these books serve to paint pictures of the everyday reality of romantic experiences or create idealised images or models of love and romance.

Bennett and Corelli contribute to different aspects of a history of attitudes towards love and romantic relationships at the turn of the twentieth century. Bennett’s observations and comments help historians to build up a picture of typical romantic expectations – usually unrealistic or idealistic expectations shaped by a general naivety that ultimately stems from relatively sheltered upbringings – those without much experience of mixed gatherings. His popular novels further their historical value in this area of study by following their female characters into actual romantic relationships (more often than not culminating in marriage) and by detailing their reactions towards the discrepancies that become apparent between their initial visions of romance and the inevitable, more mundane reality that then confronts them. His fiction argues that in spite of a general preference for unsentimentality in matters of love, romantic idealism continued to hold an important place in the minds of his characters, both male and female, and presumably in the minds of his audience. Testing previously-held notions of masculinity against the inescapable reality in romantic relationships, for example, helps a number of Arnold Bennett’s female characters to define what masculinity and femininity mean to them. And the same applies to Bennett’s male characters who demonstrate that concepts of love were not solely pertinent to femininity, as Marie Corelli’s bestselling novels largely argue.

In contrast to Bennett's books, Corelli's fiction dwells mostly within the realm of romantic idealism, preferring to escape from what she claims is the often disappointing reality of love and romance. Her approach to love and to the connection it has with notions of gender idealisation is overtly defensive. In fact, Corelli is more protective of sexual differentiation in the sphere of romantic love and relationships than in regard to any other aspect of turn-of-the-century life. Her novels accept a limited number of social changes as they relate to women's lives. As has been seen in a previous chapter, for example, they acknowledge that women should be permitted to assume an important role in the public sphere – provided that certain strict guidelines are adhered to. But they do not express a keenness or an openness to modifying or reshaping ideals of womanhood as they concern the moral position of women in romantic relationships. In the face of shifting moral and social values, Corelli's work strenuously contends that women are the primary moral and spiritual beacons in romantic situations; yet that men are inherently supreme; and that the way in which a woman behaves concerning love and relationships represents the ultimate test of her femininity. To Corelli, love tests womanhood more effectively than any other turn-of-the-century concern.

Taken together, Bennett's and Corelli's popular fiction confirms that concepts of masculinity and femininity experienced a degree of redefinition – as befits a society undergoing substantial social transition. However, and in spite of their very diverse approaches to the subject of romantic love, these novels also demonstrate that Late Victorian and Edwardian society also witnessed a reinvigoration of notions of gender idealisation. The era may have experienced numerous changes relating to, among other things, the place of women in the public and private spheres, attitudes towards female sexuality and female intellectuality; but romantic ideals and idealistic concepts of gender, especially as these concerned courtship and marriage, continued to prevail.

One of the most striking features of Victorian life was the idealisation of women by the middle and upper classes. It was a feature that complicated attitudes

towards matters of the heart and one that widened the gap between the expected and the actual attitudes to marriage and romance. According to Walter Houghton, this form of idealisation became known as ‘woman worship’ in the 1860s.⁷³⁸ It stemmed, for the most part, from the middling ranks of nineteenth century English society – from the Protestant, professional class – in response to the rapidly increasing commercialisation of the country. The family home came to symbolise a haven or a sanctuary for the husband, away from the rationalistic, abstract and impersonal market place.⁷³⁹ This idealisation also included the notion that men and women were naturally confined to ‘separate spheres’ in life. The roles that men and women assumed in the family and in society, then, were very different but were given the stamp of equal value and importance. The husband was exposed, as his social role and nature allowed him, to the cruel harshness of the competitive world of business.⁷⁴⁰ The natural role of the woman, on the other hand, was to be a wife and mother safe within the haven of the home.

However, as Sharon Aronofsky Weltman argues convincingly, the division separating these gender spheres was not always as clearly delineated as this. She points out, in reference to Coventry Patmore’s poem, *The Angel in the House* (1854-1856) and John Ruskin’s essay, ‘Of Queen’s Gardens’ (1865)⁷⁴¹ that, whereas Patmore’s poem confined the woman purely to the domestic sphere, Ruskin’s essay encouraged her to influence the mind and, following that, the actions of her husband and children, and to participate in the wider world of philanthropy. So, while the latter’s metaphorical ‘queen’ was invested with more practical power in the form of influence over her husband and more visible roles outside the home, such as philanthropic work, the former’s ‘equally metaphorical but avowedly supernatural angel’ was afforded less ‘real’ influence and confined

⁷³⁸ Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1985 [1959], p. 350.

⁷³⁹ Patricia Branca, *Silent Sisterhood: Middle Class Women in the Victorian Home*, Croom Helm, London, 1975, p. 7; Houghton, p. 351; and Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Demoralization of Society. From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values*, A. A. Knopf, New York, 1995, p. 54.

⁷⁴⁰ Houghton, p. 359.

⁷⁴¹ John Ruskin, Lecture II: ‘Of Queens’ Gardens’, in *Sesame and Lilies: The Two Paths: & The King of the Golden River*, Dent, London, 1970; and Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House*.

solely within the domestic realm. Such discrepancies, Weltman argues, meant that Ruskin's feminine ideal actually occupied 'a more real imaginative space' for those living under Queen Victoria's reign.⁷⁴² Therefore, whereas Patmore's ideal confirmed the separation of the private and the public, Ruskin's helped to obliterate 'the inside/outside dichotomy which forms the basic division of Victorian sex roles and the premise of *The Angel in the House*.'⁷⁴³

Most nineteenth-century women, the majority of moderate feminists included, accepted the notion that men and women belonged in different realms. As Joan Perkin argues: 'Marriage was still the life-plan of most of them'⁷⁴⁴ – but what is doubtful is whether they fully embraced the responsibilities implicit in this middle-class ideal of wife and mother.⁷⁴⁵ This aside, it is certainly doubtful that many women, whether they had succeeded in fulfilling the roles of wife and mother, could actually live up to, what was after all, an idealistic construction of the image of a patient, demure and angelic feminine being.

Yet, as unrealistic as it was, this 'woman worship' movement helped to shape changing attitudes towards marriage, at least in the middle and upper ranks of society. As the concept of marriage became more sentimentalised, greater stress came to be placed on romantic love.⁷⁴⁶ It was noticed that more upper-class women, for example, looked not only for a union which would take care of 'practical dynastic considerations', but also for 'affection' and even romantic love.⁷⁴⁷ Pat Jalland agrees, arguing that by the end of the century most Victorians

⁷⁴² Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, "'Be No More Housewives, but Queens": Queen Victoria and Ruskin's Domestic Mythology', in Margaret Homans and Adrienne Munich (eds.), *Remaking Queen Victoria*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 105-122, pp. 110-111.

⁷⁴³ Weltman, pp. 110-111.

⁷⁴⁴ Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women*, New York University Press, New York, 1993, p. 56. Pat Thane adds 'whatever the realities and the hazards, marriage and motherhood was the expected female goal.' (Pat Thane, 'Late Victorian Women', in T. R. Gourvish and Alan O'Day (eds.), *Later Victorian Britain, 1867-1900*, Macmillan, Houndsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London, 1988, pp. 175-208, p. 182.)

⁷⁴⁵ Houghton, p. 359.

⁷⁴⁶ Perkin, p. 54.

⁷⁴⁷ Perkin, p. 63 and p. 52.

liked to believe that they married for love – that it was in such a relationship that the most happiness lay. But it was also generally felt that, even where the primary emphasis was on love, a relationship would happily endure only if compatibility existed in other respects also, such as social and economic interests – a point that Bennett, if not the highly idealistic Corelli, takes very seriously.⁷⁴⁸

Given the importance of decisions made regarding marriage, it is not surprising that courtship was a much guarded practice during the Victorian and Edwardian area. Jane Lewis contends that there were social restrictions in place that reflected the degree of ambiguity present concerning women and marriage during this period. Despite some liberalisation of conventions, for example, that which permitted a greater number of women to engage in paid employment (thereby affording them a greater opportunity of meeting members of the opposite sex), women were still expected to place marriage and motherhood at the top of their list of priorities. Nevertheless, it was ‘not ‘done’ for a young woman to solicit male attention.’⁷⁴⁹ As Mona Caird, a late Victorian commentator on the position of women argues - a woman is considered ‘unfeminine’ if she does not want marriage, but she is deemed ‘immodest’ if she does.⁷⁵⁰ Such moral and social restrictions surely added to the difficulties that many young women from relatively sheltered backgrounds must have experienced when looking to find a suitable life partner.

With a decidedly different emphasis, Olive Banks’ study of feminism stresses that society at the end of the nineteenth century was experiencing moral and social shifts that made inter-gender mixing slightly easier than earlier in the century. Banks argues that many of the changes impacting on girls’ lives at the beginning

⁷⁴⁸ Patricia Jalland, *Women, Marriage and Politics, 1860-1914*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, pp. 75-6.

⁷⁴⁹ Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change*, Wheatsheaf Books, Sussex, 1984, p. 77.

⁷⁵⁰ Mona Caird, *The Morality of Marriage and Other Essays on the Status and Destiny of Women*, George Redway, 1897, p. 103, cited in Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950*, p. 77.

of the twentieth century had little to do with the feminist movement, and more to do with

a loosening of manners and morals and an emancipation, for the young middle-class girl in particular, from those suffocating conventions that had restricted her within the narrow world of Victorian morality.⁷⁵¹

These changes, she suggests, were gradual in nature, beginning in the later years of the nineteenth century and increasing in the degree of impact they had by the early twentieth century. The late nineteenth century, for example, saw 'both a greater mixing of the sexes in leisure activities and more opportunities to escape from the confines of the home'.⁷⁵² The popularity of cycling in the 1890s both reflected and assisted this greater degree of mobility – especially among younger middle-class women (although Banks does point out that there was an initial hostile reaction to female cycling, especially stemming from the more conservative and anti-feminist sections of society). Still, by the turn of the century, Banks contends that many of the more 'rigid' social restrictions had dissipated even if a large number of the more 'irksome' restraints remained.⁷⁵³

Significantly, however, Bennett's novels dispute the validity of Banks' argument concerning this general loosening of social conventions; although, of course, it has to be remembered that Banks' study concerns itself largely with analysing feminism during this era and so her observations are expected to be less representative of the more conventional sections of turn-of-the-century English society. Still, Bennett's fiction, often situated with a Five Towns setting, supports the idea that many of the larger social shifts identified by early twentieth century commentators and by late twentieth century and early twenty-first century historians, had not yet filtered down to affect the lives of his individual characters. For many of Bennett's female protagonists a relative scarcity of social interaction

⁷⁵¹ Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism. A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement*, Martin Robertson, Oxford, 1981, p. 180.

⁷⁵² Banks, *Faces of Feminism*, p. 180.

⁷⁵³ Banks, *Faces of Feminism*, p. 180.

with members of the opposite sex, often led to feelings of loneliness and frustration with the whole practice of courtship, as well as to the fostering of unrealistic expectations of romantic relationships.

It is understandable that, in a society that endorsed matrimony as the sole acceptable outlet for romantic attachment, marriage itself often came to represent something of a battleground between idealistic expectations and realistic experiences of love. As the ultimate form that romantic relationships were expected to assume, it was an institution that was shrouded in idealism yet, as the century progressed, so many of its flaws and inequalities were more openly acknowledged. For this reason, and because anticipation of marriage as well as initial experiences of it take up a significant proportion of Bennett and Corelli's fiction, this chapter, although it is centred on the feelings of single women, often draws ideas about and experiences of marriage into its discussion.

Similarly, in a thesis concerning middle-class women, there may seem to be little room for any analysis of men's feelings. However, men's dreams and experiences of love too form an integral part of the whole context in which women experienced romance. These novels approach how women felt about men in the realm of love and romance and sexuality. They also portray how men felt about women and love and sex. The experiences and ideas, therefore, of both genders are important in attempting to paint a picture of love and courtship at the turn of the century. Both form parts of a romantic relationship – both provide insight concerning the reactions of the other – and so both are discussed in this section of the thesis. Nevertheless, I have kept accounts of male experiences to a minimum – in a way fitting a study of unmarried women's lives.

As has been suggested, there are few sources that offer historians insights into how 'ordinary' women felt about their more intimate experiences. The studies of Pat Jalland and Patricia Branca, for example, are among only a few which have chosen

to incorporate more individual experiences of romantic love into their writing.⁷⁵⁴ Given awareness of this relative absence, it is fitting that it is the main aim of this chapter to offer insights into more general notions of romantic escapism, but also, perhaps more importantly, to contribute to these more individualised or personalised depictions of love and personal relationships at the turn of the twentieth century – depictions whose degree of typicality are rooted in the literary reputation of the author and in the strong selling power of the novels in mind.



Dreams of marriage and of contented domesticity frequently punctuate Bennett's popular fiction. Most of his single, young characters, whether female or male, of calm or passionate temperament, tend to envisage themselves in conventional marriages at one time or another.⁷⁵⁵ The expectation that most young, middle-class women would marry and, furthermore, that they would want to do so, was assumed to such a degree that concerns otherwise are rarely aired in Bennett's novels. For the most part, the only thoughts expressed on this subject by Bennett's more conventional female protagonists are those that reveal the enormous extent to which known spinsters are to be pitied. Women like Hilda Lessways (*Hilda*

⁷⁵⁴ See Jalland, *Women, Marriage and Politics 1860-1914*; and Branca, *Silent Sisterhood*, 1975.

⁷⁵⁵ In his extreme loneliness, Richard Larch (*A Man From the North*, 1898) constantly imagines himself married to any woman he happens to meet or even pass by. More than ten years later, in *Clayhanger* (1910), Bennett shows that the same dreams occur to Edwin Clayhanger. Although, because Edwin's longings are less intense than those experienced by Richard, he confines them to those women whom he actually knows. Edwin, just after meeting Hilda Lessways and not long after becoming properly acquainted with Janet Orgreave, contrasts the idea of marrying each of them. (Arnold Bennett, *A Man From the North*, Hamish Hamilton Library, London, 1973 [1898], p. 169; and Arnold Bennett, *Clayhanger*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1975 [1910], p. 211.) What compounds the legitimacy of this argument is the fact that the absolute normalcy of marriage is also endorsed in many of Bennett's more escapist novels, in his potboilers, comedies or simply his less serious books. Within these he does not feel the need to escape from general social expectations regarding romance. Marriage is the anticipated, the expected, outcome in works such as *The Grand Babylon Hotel* (1902), one of his highest selling adventure stories, and *Teresa of Watling Street* (1904), a book he labels a 'fantasia'. The comical novel, *The Card*, as has been seen previously, is also no different. By the end of each of these, the marriage of the hero and the heroine successfully and joyfully rounds off the story. (See Arnold Bennett, *The Grand Babylon Hotel*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1954 [1902]; Arnold Bennett, *Teresa of Watling Street*, C. Combridge, Birmingham, 1962 [1904]; and Arnold Bennett, *The Card. A Story of Adventure in the Five Towns*, Methuen, London, 1964 [1911].)

Lessways), Janet Orgreave (*Hilda Lessways* and *Clayhanger*), and Sophia and Constance Baines (*The Old Wives' Tale*) frequently display concern, often concern of a condescending nature, for two of Bennett's notable spinster characters, Sarah Gailey (*Hilda Lessways*) and Miss Insull (*The Old Wives' Tale*). Moreover, their feelings towards these unfortunate women do not end with sympathy. More often than not, the thoughts of each of these more successful women betray a sense of intolerance that is directed at what they perceive to be the pathetic lives of female celibates – lives that were often marked by financial hardship and social ostracism.⁷⁵⁶ And this is all in keeping with the general tone of the period. As Jane Lewis points out, before the First World War, spinsterhood regularly 'connoted failure'.⁷⁵⁷ The idea of celibacy was distasteful at best. For many, marriage was the only means of leading a fulfilling life, particularly for women.

The fact that Bennett's New Woman character, Hilda Lessways, identifies marriage as the ultimate goal in her life further cements the representativeness of this view. At different stages in the novel, Hilda imagines herself married, both to Edwin Clayhanger and to George Cannon. Sometimes her domestic fantasies are serious, at others they are more innocently fanciful. For instance, on finding her name linked with George's in local gossip, Bennett comments that Hilda had certainly thought of him as a husband, but not seriously –

because just as a young solitary man will imagine himself the spouse of a dozen different girls in a week, so will an unmated girl picture herself united to every eligible and passably sympathetic male that crosses her path. It is the everyday diversion of the fancy.⁷⁵⁸

Hilda harbours many ambitions deemed 'unconventional' for a woman of her class and era, for example, she desires to play an important role in the male dominated public sphere. Still, marriage to a stronger, worldly and powerful man strikes her

⁷⁵⁶ For impressions of spinsters, for example, see Arnold Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1976 [1911], pp. 66-68 and pp. 205-210; and Arnold Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, Edinburgh, n.d. [1908], pp. 271-272.

⁷⁵⁷ Lewis, *Women and England 1870-1950*, p. 3.

as the sole outcome of her existence that will grant her life the sense of dignity that she craves. As Bennett writes,

She dreamed, in her extreme excitement, of belonging absolutely to some man. And despite all her pride and independence, she dwelt with pleasure and longing on the vision of being his, of being at his disposal, of being under his might, of being helpless before him. She thought, desolated: 'I am nobody's...'. She scorned herself for being nobody's. To belong utterly to some male seemed to be the one tolerable fate for her in the world. And it was a glorious fate, whether it brought good or evil. Any other was ignobly futile, was despicable.⁷⁵⁹

With the example of Hilda, Bennett confirms for the benefit of his contemporary audience, and demonstrates to us his distanced readers, just how strong the pull was for this life that was conventionally laid out for women. The otherwise unconventional Hilda never contemplates rejecting this role. The only point in the novel when she even comes close to dissent is when she claims that, at the age of twenty-one, she feels too young for marriage.⁷⁶⁰ Yet, Hilda, in an unusual twist of events, marries twice. Her attitude towards marriage sits comfortably with the common belief at the time that the most natural roles for women were those of a wife and a mother. Domestic idealism, then, managed to maintain a firm hold on most sections of turn-of-the-century society. And marriage, as the sole acceptable public manifestation of romantic love, continued to be viewed by many, surprisingly by men as well as women, as one of the most important, if not the only, means of ennobling, even completing a life.

Yet Bennett's observations about and comments on social and romantic interaction between the sexes at the turn of the twentieth century, often highlight how difficult

⁷⁵⁸ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 224.

⁷⁵⁹ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, pp. 225-226.

it was for many young women and men to reach their ultimate goal of securing a satisfying marriage. His fiction demonstrates that issues like social class and the cultural tenor of the family home tend to influence the extent to which young women had access to potential husbands. In many of his less serious novels, such as *Helen with the High Hand* and *The Card*, Bennett presents numerous examples of mixed gatherings – parties, even trips to the seaside – without the accompanying sense that what is taking place is extraordinary or remarkable.⁷⁶¹

However, within these passages, Bennett avoids commentary of a more serious nature on the often negative effects that limited access to meetings with the members of the opposite sex can have on ‘ordinary’ women and men. In *Clayhanger*, Bennett shows how Edwin Clayhanger’s insular family life contrasts with the rich and lively cultured household of the Orgreaves. Edwin finds that the Orgreave home provides the opportunity of meeting women that his own home life and his place of work (a printing business) lacks. There he meets the only two women who can be said to have ever romantically interested him, Janet Orgreave and her visiting friend, Hilda Lessways. Surprisingly, unlike her sisters who marry into well-positioned families, the pretty and charming Janet does not marry – ‘despite the number and variety of her acquaintances, despite her challenging readiness to flirt, and her occasional coquetties.’⁷⁶² Still, whatever her reason for remaining single, it is clear that the scope and the variety of her social acquaintances is one factor that should recommend her to courtship, if not ultimately to marriage.

The same could be said of the distinction drawn between the lively social life of the culturally elite Suttons in *Anna of the Five Towns* and Anna Tellwright’s own isolated family life.⁷⁶³ However, in this instance, the Church steps in to facilitate

⁷⁶⁰ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 12.

⁷⁶¹ Arnold Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, Alan Sutton, Gloucester, 1983 [1910], pp. 73-79 and pp. 147-148; and Bennett, *The Card*, pp. 76-79.

⁷⁶² Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 374.

⁷⁶³ Compared with the rarity of visitors to Anna’s home, the Suttons have what seem to be frequent dinner parties, and at one stage, they even convince Anna to accompany them and Henry Mynors

meetings between young men and women – as indeed it does in a number of Arnold Bennett's novels. It is through teaching at the local Sunday School that Anna comes to meet her future husband, Henry Mynors, and the man that she later comes to realise that she really loves, Willie Price.⁷⁶⁴

The Church also features as a facilitator of mixed gatherings in Bennett's novel, *Hilda Lessways*. The difference is that this time the aim is more obviously directed towards socialising. At the opening of the book, Hilda is offered the opportunity of attending the Church choir's annual dance. But she refuses on the grounds that she does not care for dancing. There is little indication that Hilda and her mother, who rarely receives visitors, miss society. However, this does not prevent her awareness of the fact that she is growing older and that she is not yet married – both playing on Hilda's mind. At the age of twenty-one, Hilda admits that she still feels like a child. She considers herself to be 'ages short of marriage'. The fact that, apart from a few tradesmen, the vicar and the curate, 'she never spoke to a man from one month's end to the next', increases the unlikeliness, or even the impossibility, of contemplating such a step.⁷⁶⁵ Yet, despite making it clear that her inclination lies with remaining single, and not with seeking out a husband, Bennett also indicates that she is under increasing pressure to at least think about the prospect of marrying. He also suggests that there is a direct correlation between this and a girl's age. Hilda does not feel as if she is in any way ready to marry, but she still experiences a rising sense of discontent and frustration associated with the awareness that the whole matter is becoming more urgent as her youth slips away from her.⁷⁶⁶

on a holiday trip. It is on this trip, for example, that Anna eventually becomes engaged to Mynors. (Arnold Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, Wordsworth Classics, Hertfordshire, 1994 [1902], pp. 104-129.)

⁷⁶⁴ In one scene, for example, Bennett describes, in a somewhat uneventful fashion, an encounter between all three young people as they wait for Anna's sister to emerge from her class. (Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, pp. 4-5.)

⁷⁶⁵ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 12.

⁷⁶⁶ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 12.

As Bennett's 'new woman', Hilda thinks about her situation more deeply than most other 'ordinary' women. Her desire to experience more of life than is typically offered to middle-class women at the turn of the twentieth century certainly contributes to the feeling that she is not yet ready to embrace the conventional role of wife. However, it remains that societal pressure to marry, and to marry at an accepted age, is pervasive enough to affect even the more unusual of Bennett's female protagonists. Even with the distraction of other as yet unarticulated desires and ambitions in her mind, this 'new woman' still expects to and wants to marry – and feels under pressure to hurry and do so.

Bennett then paints a rather sparse picture of mixed gatherings and of courtship among members of the provincial middle classes, especially the lower rungs of this group. Outside of their immediate circle, which includes their families, most of his characters have little interaction with members of the opposite sex. For some this does not present a problem. Constance Baines marries Samuel Povey, the young man who works in her parents' millinery shop, and they both lead a life of contented companionship.⁷⁶⁷ Anna Tellwright, although she does not marry the man that she truly loves, still benefits from her union with Henry Mynors. Henry loves her and she has affection for him, and their marriage enables her to escape from the miserable house of her tyrannical father.⁷⁶⁸

However, for others, such limited social contact yields negative results. In the first place, a number of Bennett's characters experience depressing feelings of loneliness and of frustration. And secondly, being sheltered from members of the opposite sex often leads to a state of naivety, a type of social ignorance, that often serves to foster thoughts of romantic grandeur and gender idealisation. In a number of instances, the effects of such a reaction wreak hardship, if not tragedy, on the individuals involved.

⁷⁶⁷ See Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, Book II on 'Constance'.

⁷⁶⁸ For a discussion of Anna's feelings for Henry Mynors, see the proposal scene in Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, pp. 128-129.

Firstly, loneliness and frustration. What is most telling about Bennett's treatment of this issue is the fact that, although some young women in his novels experience these feelings, young men seem to do so in a more pronounced manner. No doubt Sophia Baines suffers loneliness as she waits for two years, working in her parents' shop – a job that she hates – for the return of the man with whom she is completely infatuated, Gerald Scales. But Bennett gives his readers little insight into the depth of her feelings.⁷⁶⁹ Similar remarks could be made of Janet Orgreave in *Clayhanger*. Bennett's narrative hints that the only reason that the beautiful and charming Janet never marries is because she is waiting for Edwin Clayhanger to propose to her. The only commentary that Bennett makes in reference to this situation is in the form of Edwin's scorn of her wasteful celibacy. He offers no direct insight into Janet's feelings.⁷⁷⁰

However, more is made of Edwin's own frustration over the difficulties of courtship, as well as that felt by Richard Larch in *A Man From the North*. As has been mentioned, Edwin experiences a degree of anxiety concerning his own continuing state of celibacy and his delayed decisions regarding marriage proposals. Early in the novel he engages himself to Hilda Lessways, only to discover later that she has broken off their proposed union for reasons he does not understand. Subsequently, he spends the next ten years, until he meets her again, thinking about her to the point of obsession, while at the same time contemplating the possibility of a life of contented domesticity with the more demure Janet.⁷⁷¹

Richard Larch's reactions to the loneliness that results from social isolation are even more intense. Richard moves from the provinces to London in order to pursue a career. Such a move severely heightens any yearnings for female

⁷⁶⁹ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, pp. 94-95.

⁷⁷⁰ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 487. It is Edwin's Auntie Hamps' belief that Janet waits only for Edwin's proposal. (Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 495.) And Edwin almost proposes marriage to Janet, but more because he desires to avoid celibacy himself than for any real love for her. His true love is the unpredictable Hilda Lessways. (Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 376 and p. 458.)

⁷⁷¹ For Edwin's thoughts on proposing to Janet, see Bennett, *Clayhanger*, pp. 373-375.

companionship that he had previously experienced. He blames ‘conventions’ for preventing him from walking up to a ‘nice’ or ‘promising’ girl in the street or on a bus and making her acquaintance. And the seeming injustice of all of this is only enhanced by his belief that there are probably ‘thousands of ‘nice girls’ pining for men such as he’.⁷⁷² Such social conventions make him feel as if he is ‘imprisoned by a relentless, unscaleable wall’.⁷⁷³ His immediate solution is to resort to day-dreaming – dreams of being in drawing-rooms filled with young men and women – all ‘chattering vivaciously and cleverly’.⁷⁷⁴ Moreover, a lack of social experience with women leads Richard to idealise the other sex. In his mind, he desires a New Woman, unorthodox, irreligious, independent, equal.⁷⁷⁵ But eventual interaction with such women proves uncomfortably intimidating for him. The only answer to ending his ‘frightful solitude’, then, is to ennoble the conventional cashier, Laura Roberts, to marry her and to settle down to a life of suburbia, thereby relinquishing his dreams of distinguishing himself through literature.⁷⁷⁶ Laura ‘worships’ him and he has ‘great tenderness’ for her, so there is nothing to say that they will not be content, even happy, together.⁷⁷⁷

Richard and Edwin’s examples, apart from helping to further expose the substantial ‘gaps’ existing between naïve romantic idealisation and eventual experience of actual relationships, also serve to emphasise the view that there is every likelihood that men at the turn of the twentieth century tended to experience a greater degree of frustration regarding restrictive social conventions than their female counterparts. The main reason for this undoubtedly lies with the fact that men were expected to initiate courtship – as Jane Lewis argues, it was unseemly

⁷⁷² Bennett, *A Man From the North*, pp. 154-155.

⁷⁷³ Bennett, *A Man From the North*, p. 155.

⁷⁷⁴ Bennett, *A Man From the North*, p. 155.

⁷⁷⁵ Bennett, *A Man From the North*, pp. 82-83.

⁷⁷⁶ Bennett, *A Man From the North*, p. 175 and p. 169.

⁷⁷⁷ Bennett, *A Man From the North*, p. 177. Although it could be argued that Richard does not really drastically alter his dreams – the first thought we hear that he has on the idea of romantic union is his observation of his sister’s very warm and homely marriage as ‘idyllic’ – rather than of a passionately smouldering and unconventional union. (Bennett, *A Man From the North*, pp. 12-13.)

for a woman to do so.⁷⁷⁸ Therefore, women rarely anticipated having much control over these situations as men did, and consequently were not likely to suffer the same strain of frustration.

Women in Bennett's novels, however, are presented as being more likely to make rash decisions influenced as they are by notions of romantic idealisation. And there is every indication that these illusions stem from ignorance or naivety – the result of a sheltered upbringing. So, whereas Richard Larch realises the impossibility of achieving his romantic ideal before deciding on a romantic partner, women like Hilda Lessways and Sophia Baines do not.

Hilda Lessways marries George Cannon out of admiration for his masculine worldliness and from an urge to fulfil her sexual desires. Her decision is impetuous and proves misguided. She does not marry for love (as has been said, she loves Edwin Clayhanger), and she suffers the consequences – namely, the tragic frustration that accompanies the realisation that she has not been true to her real feelings and to her higher ambitions, and that she is locked into a marriage with a man she admires less than when she was simply a naïve admirer in awe of him.⁷⁷⁹ In an unusual twist of events, Hilda finds herself to be free of George, but then discovers that she is pregnant. The feeling of shame that results from knowing that she has not been true to her sense of integrity prevents her from confessing all to Edwin Clayhanger and perhaps marrying him, leading a relatively 'normal' life – one not coloured by personal disgrace and social ostracism. Instead, she accepts the repercussions of her misguided decision and lives in relative isolation, coping with the financial hardship that comes from single-handedly managing an unsuccessful boarding-house.

⁷⁷⁸ Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950*, p. 77.

⁷⁷⁹ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 224. Hilda acknowledges that 'respectable' society would endorse her and George's union, but, knowing her own inner feelings, her 'conscience would not chime with the conscience of society'. (Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 257.)

Sophia Baines' experiences follow a similar path. Aware of her mother's opposition, she elopes with the enigmatic travelling salesman, Gerald Scales, only to discover that she has been misled by her idealisation of his character. Like Hilda, sexual passion and naïve admiration of his masculine worldliness blinds her to his weaknesses – his unmanly propensity for extravagance, his lack of integrity and of loyalty.⁷⁸⁰ He soon abandons her, leaving her to make her own way in life. She does so successfully by running a series of money-making boarding-houses in Paris. But, by the novel's end, it is clear that she has suffered through her life choices. She regrets that she is childless, unlike her sister, the homely Constance. All that her adult life has amounted to is a 'brief passion, and then nearly thirty years in a boarding-house'.⁷⁸¹

These examples demonstrate Bennett's view that being sheltered from interaction with members of the opposite sex often leads to a sense of naivety that then encourages romantic illusions. Moreover, it is not unusual for young women, usually of an independent or passionate nature, to abandon reason, as well as the advice of experienced guardians, and to make decisions about romantic relationships that they later come to regret. In a society that does not endorse the widespread availability of divorce, it is almost impossible to avoid the consequences of rash or misguided decisions made regarding matrimony. And, of course, only experience of romantic relationships, and the sexual experience that accompanies marriage itself, serve to bring full realisation of the naivety of romantic idealisation to the minds of those who have been so misled. As has been argued, by then it is usually too late.

Bennett's treatment of this aspect of romantic love further illustrates that stories about unhappiness in marriage were not necessarily new or shocking to a Late

⁷⁸⁰ Gerald Scales' vain and overly eager public exhibitions of his manly worldliness, for example, soon comes to embarrass the young, recently married Sophia. (Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 311.)

Victorian and Edwardian reading public. Despite the continuing popularity of the idealisation of marriage and of the place of women within that institution, there was much public discussion of marriage problems and failures. Popular New Women novels of the era, for example, often spot-lighted ‘a host of horrors lurking behind the veneer of marital respectability’ – horrors that could be hinted at in magazine and journal articles on the subject, but that could only really be elaborated in fiction.⁷⁸² Nevertheless, awareness of the many problems and inequities associated with marriage did not automatically result in onslaughts or crusades against the institution. Divorce remained relatively hard to obtain and the sexual double standard inherent in divorce laws stayed in place.⁷⁸³ Attempts to reform this legislation were seen by many as attacks on the sanctity of marriage – an institution that, more than ever it then seemed, required defending.⁷⁸⁴ What arose out of this, then, were movements steered towards improving marriage. Even moderate feminists, Lucy Bland argues, promoted marital reform, not marital abandonment.⁷⁸⁵ Campaigns for divorce reform on the part of many feminist groups, it follows, were not geared towards winning sexual freedom for women so much as they were directed towards freeing unhappy wives from dissolute husbands.⁷⁸⁶ Notions of gender-based sexual morality continued to pervade turn-of-the-century society, and not just its more conservative elements.

However, Bennett’s novels do not spend an inordinate amount of time or of detail in discussing actual marital problems, in spite of the prevalence of public concerns

⁷⁸¹ These words are spoken by Constance who does not understand her sister’s decisions. However, the sentiments are supported by Sophia herself. (Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, pp. 577-578.)

⁷⁸² Lucy Bland, ‘The Married Woman, the ‘New Woman’ and the Feminist: Sexual Politics of the 1890s’, in Jane Rendall (ed.), *Equal or Different. Women’s Politics 1800-1914*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, pp. 141-164, p. 151.

⁷⁸³ See J. A. and Olive Banks, *Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 1964, for example, p. 107; Banks, *Faces of Feminism*, for example, p. 194; and François Bédarida, *A Social History of England 1851-1990*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990, especially p. 121, for a discussion of divorce and the sexual double standard during this period.

⁷⁸⁴ Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950*, p. 78.

⁷⁸⁵ Bland, p. 147.

⁷⁸⁶ Banks, *Faces of Feminism*, p. 195.

regarding this institution.⁷⁸⁷ Furthermore, little is written about the lives of happily married women.⁷⁸⁸ For the most part, then, marriage serves to cast insight into the minds of recently married women. As the one accepted form of emotional and sexual intimacy between the sexes, it is often used by Bennett to either confirm or, as in most cases, to discredit the legitimacy or viability of previously-held romantic ideals. Recently married women, like Hilda Lessways and Sophia Baines, are useful only because they often provide valuable insights into, and some understanding of, expectations, frustration and fulfilment when it comes to romantic relationships. For this is usually where the dynamic nature of Bennett's narratives lie – in the struggle between much desired ideals and inevitable realisation of the mundane reality.⁷⁸⁹

Moreover, what is revealing about the examples of Hilda, Sophia, Anna and Constance, is Bennett's preference for a relatively unsentimental approach to romantic love. Women like Anna and Constance, who initially accept a quite sedate, very realistic model of love, tend to live contented, if not extraordinary, lives. Their experiences are surely representative of most 'ordinary' middle-class

⁷⁸⁷ This is not to say that there are no examples of novels in which Bennett looks at the everyday reality of rather conventional marriages, that is to say, marriages that do not end with desertion or bigamy-induced prison sentences. There are two books that immediately come to mind that do examine this subject of marriage and its associated problems in greater detail, *These Twain* and *Leonora*. (Arnold Bennett, *These Twain*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1975 [1916]; and Arnold Bennett, *Leonora. A Novel*, Books for Libraries Press, Plainview, New York, 1975 [1903].) However, I do not feel justified in talking at any great length about their findings simply because the former, published in 1916, is located just outside the timeframe of this thesis (but it is useful as a further insight into the relationship between Hilda Lessways and Edwin Clayhanger portrayed in the first two novels of the trilogy, *Clayhanger* and *Hilda Lessways*), and the latter deals with a woman who has really been married too long to be of any immediate insight into unmarried women.

⁷⁸⁸ Constance and Samuel Povey's marriage provides a good example of this. For the greater part of *The Old Wives' Tale* Constance is a married woman, but, apart from implying that she is content, little other insight is given into her feelings. Instead, this section of the novel prefers to concentrate on mapping the tension that often exists within Constance concerning her almost obsessive love for her often unthinking, selfish son, Cyril.

⁷⁸⁹ No doubt, this helps to explain why two of his more memorable female characters, Hilda Lessways (*Hilda Lessways*) and Sophia Baines (*The Old Wives' Tale*), are permitted the brief opportunity of dipping into marriage only to re-emerge and resume a status resembling that of their previous single life. Both are in differing ways abandoned by their husbands. Bennett and his audience, it would seem, found plots concerning the sometimes tragic effects of the everyday reality of marriage, and more specifically the effects of unrealised dreams, of thwarted or frustrated

women at this time, when fear of spinsterhood and the inability to escape from unhappy marriages rendered marital decisions worthy of calm and rational thought. And, as further indication of the all-too-real importance of these decisions, Bennett shows that women who do make mistakes tend to immediately realise and willingly accept the inevitable, unhappy consequences. Neither Sophia nor Hilda expect to escape the emotional and sexual dissatisfaction, feelings of low self-esteem, social ostracism and the probability of interminable celibacy of the unhappily married or the abandoned woman. Love and marriage in Bennett's novels, therefore, is far too real and too important an issue to be treated in the overtly dramatic fashion that it meets, for instance, in Marie Corelli's escapist literature. In Bennett's fictional realism, the reality of romantic relationships as practical unions is taken very seriously. Most of his women exhibit a strong aversion to the feminine vulnerability and sentimentality that characterises Corelli's one-dimensional protagonists. Rarely do they abandon reason for romantic folly and, where they do, they sensibly live with the consequences. In the realm of love, Bennett's female characters act as they do elsewhere in their lives – with a fair degree of common sense and pragmatism and a lack of sentimentality.

So, whereas Corelli complains that there is too little romantic sentimentality in the 'modern' world, Bennett argues that a little is too much.⁷⁹⁰ And he gives his characters frequent opportunities of voicing this in his narratives. As has been said, both Hilda and Sophia accept the folly of their marital choices and each settles down, without protest, to what many readers would regard as tragically unhappy lives. In a completely different situation, Anna Tellwright demonstrates her disregard for romantic sentimentality – to the point that she rejects any possibility of securing true love. Anna honours her promise to marry Henry Mynors, even though she comes to realise that she loves Willie Price. Although there is no doubting the honesty of her emotional attachment to Willie, she does

expectations on idealistic young women more alluring, entertaining or even more thought-provoking, than stories revolving around contented or even happy marriages.

not abandon her duties to others for the sake of romance. Nor does she make a fuss about her willing self-sacrifice.⁷⁹¹ In *The Old Wives' Tale*, Sophia Baines is given further opportunity for illustrating her disdain for sentimentality. She is forced to receive the romantic overtures of the highly sensitive, highly passionate Frenchman, Monsieur Chirac. She ultimately rejects his advances – an act that impels him to volunteer to undertake a highly risky and ultimately fateful ballooning expedition as part of his job as a war correspondent. Sophia shows little sympathy for Chirac's martyrdom. Instead, and in spite of being convinced of 'the genuineness of the emotion which expressed itself in all this flamboyant behaviour', she considers him to be a sentimentally weak man.⁷⁹² At times she pities him and sometimes she even derives positive feelings from the situation –

The hard common sense in her might sneer, but indubitably
she was the centre of a romantic episode.⁷⁹³

But mostly, she is embarrassed by Chirac – by his thoughts, his words and his actions. Whatever her fluctuating emotions, it remains that, because of what she sees as his 'feminine slavery to sentiment', her estimation of him as a man and as a rational human being falls.⁷⁹⁴

Bennett's disregard for romantic sentimentality extends to his less serious novels. Indeed, it is here that he allows full rein to his scorn of such impractical, almost luxurious, thought and behaviour. In *Helen with the High Hand*, the central female figure is permitted to indulge only very briefly in dramatic displays of romantic sentimentality – all for the purpose of the author's satiric intentions. However, she soon resumes her position as a highly pragmatic, often scheming, young woman who manages to get all that she chases, including her husband.⁷⁹⁵

⁷⁹⁰ Corelli's views on love follow this section on Bennett's novels.

⁷⁹¹ See Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 176, for Bennett's commentary on Anna's actions.

⁷⁹² Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 435.

⁷⁹³ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 435.

⁷⁹⁴ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 430.

⁷⁹⁵ In one amusing incident she faints while being forced to dance publicly with Andrew Dean, the man she loves but whose commitment she is having trouble securing. Afterwards she whispers, 'in a voice of grief, to James, 'you fiddled while Rome was burning!'' (Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, p. 79.) Bennett treats this uncharacteristic display of over-wrought emotionalism with light comedy. Helen also cries on numerous occasions over the possibility that she might not get

Moreover, when one of the novel's male characters indulges in a spot of pure sentimentality, he is mercilessly shown for the 'fool' that he is. Emanuel Prockter sings a love song for a gathering at his stepmother's house:

If he looked a fool, his looks seriously misinterpreted his feelings. He did not spare himself on that evening. He told his stepmother's guests all about love and all about his own yearnings. He hid nothing from them. He made no secret of the fact that he lived for love alone, that he had known innumerable loves, but none like one particular variety, which he described in full detail. As a confession, and especially one uttered before many maidens, it did not err on the side of reticence. Presently, having described a kind of amorous circle, he came again to: 'O Love!'⁷⁹⁶

Obviously the fake and extravagant and self-indulgent elements of sentimentality grate on Bennett's grasp of straightforward, honest, common sense – as they do on the nerves of most of Bennett's protagonists, and certainly on Emanuel's audience. The note on which Bennett closes the novel further exemplifies this. Helen ends the narrative by voicing the sentiment that two perfectly happy love affairs in the one household (hers and her uncle's) are to be regarded as absolutely 'nauseating'. Indubitably, his less serious, more escapist literature mirrors something of the appeal that many of Corelli's bestsellers have regarding romantic escapism. Nevertheless, it still stands that the often comical *Helen with the High Hand* knowingly mocks the age's obvious desire for escapist sentimentality – obvious through the remarkable popularity of sentimental parlour ballads and novels, not least of these being Corelli's works – and a widespread desire for romantic escapism that parallels that for depictions of romantic realism.⁷⁹⁷

Andrew back. (Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, p. 80.) But her common sense prevails and she gets what she wants – without much sentimentality at all.

⁷⁹⁶ Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, p. 74.

⁷⁹⁷ For commentary on popular parlour ballads see, for example, Michael Turner and Antony Miall (eds.), *The Edwardian Song Book Drawing-Room Ballads, 1900-1914*, Methuen, London, 1982;

All of this is not to argue that romantic ideals did not play a significant role in both the formation and maintenance of intimate relationships. Bennett's novels demonstrate that these notions continued to be very important to a general readership that was still very much intrigued by romance, even if it did not generally esteem it above more familiar pragmatic concerns. His texts show historians that his turn-of-the-century reading public expected that young men and women would confront the pervasive theory of separate but equal spheres in both their fantasies concerning romantic love, and in their actual experiences of it. His novels help to reveal the extent to which these ideas exerted influence on individual behaviour. The common factor is that this theory significantly shapes their thoughts and their experiences, whether disappointed or gratified in their expectations. As will be seen, there is a real interplay between the different types of strengths expected from each gender, and the different types of weaknesses tolerated, or even desired.

In Bennett's novels, romantic attraction tends to work on two very interrelated levels. In the first place, and most obviously, women and men want to be found attractive for their specific individual personality traits. On another level, however, they desire admiration for the possession of traits more generally ascribed to their gender – to a generally accepted notion of femininity or masculinity. As for actually admiring a member of the opposite sex, his books further reveal that, although these typical gender attributes are admired, so too are numerous weaknesses or deviations from the popular ideal. For example, he shows that a sense of superiority or personal power did not rest solely with the male sex, as claimed according to the stereotype of gender ideals. Numerous women not only discovered that they were the stronger companion, but at times they even enjoyed the sensation of power that accompanied this recognition. True to depictions of the varied reality of lived experience, Bennett's fiction demonstrates a complex inter-weaving of different gender expectations.

and Michael Turner (ed.), *Parlour Poetry, a Hundred and One Improving Gems*, Michael Joseph, London, 1967.

In the first place, Bennett's books suggest that young women and young men tend to be initially drawn to an impression of the other's masculinity or femininity. Often these concepts of gender are mysterious – at best, vaguely defined. Hilda Lessways, readers are told, is attracted to George Cannon solely because of this overwhelming impression of his manliness. Unfortunately, awareness of this reasoning comes too late to Hilda. She marries him only to discover that, with familiarity, with an intimate knowledge of his personality, his desires and his weaknesses, she loses a substantial degree of the admiration she had had for him and indeed the sense of awe in which she had held him.

The dominating impression was not now the impression of his masculinity; there was no clearly dominating impression. He had lost, for her, the romantic allurements of the strange and the unknown.⁷⁹⁸

Had her feelings for him been based on something other than a romantically idealised image, say on actual love, then it is very probable that they would have survived the initial shock of marriage with more hope. Of course, knowledge of Cannon's bigamy ultimately condemns their relationship, but not before Hilda's disillusionment becomes all too apparent.

Edwin Clayhanger's feelings for Hilda are similarly based on a dominating sense of her untouchable, even unapproachable femininity. Edwin rejects the thought of marriage with the demure Janet Orgreave principally because they are on too friendly terms. They know each other too well. To him she has lost the allure of a lover – mysterious in her femininity.⁷⁹⁹ Hilda, however, retains this strangeness – almost a decade after their first meeting she continues to 'baffle' him. This makes him almost obsessive in his desire to 'reconstruct in his fancy all her emotional existence; he wanted to get at her – to possess her intimate mind'.⁸⁰⁰ In Bennett's works, then, this sense that men and women are absolutely distinct from the other,

⁷⁹⁸ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 202.

⁷⁹⁹ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 376.

or even the ardent desire to believe that this is so, drives much of the initial attraction between potential lovers.

Furthermore, initial interaction with members of the opposite sex also serves the purpose, in Bennett's texts, of helping individual characters to clarify or sharpen what their own sense of masculinity or femininity means to them. Hilda, a woman who experiences a good deal of confusion while attempting to align what she defines as her more feminine desires for love with her more masculine ambitions for employment, finds that it is only after marrying George Cannon that she becomes more interested in her appearance. In assuming a more conventionally feminine position, Hilda discovers that her 'old contempt for finery' dissolves – all 'in the glory of her new condition'.⁸⁰¹ Involvement in a romantic relationship, and more than that, sexual experience through marriage, tightens Hilda's hold on her femininity – it helps her to understand more of what her gender means to her, where her previous inexperience with men did not.

Edwin Clayhanger addresses the issue of his gender identity more directly. During the period in which he attempts to work out his feelings for Hilda, and when he discovers that she is attracted to him, his reactions range from manly pride to brutish superiority. Hilda awakens these emotions in him.⁸⁰² Furthermore, her obvious feelings for him flatter him. Amid the disappointment and anger wrought by disillusionment with his career and his father's harsh treatment of him, Hilda's attentions 'had given him a new conception of himself.'⁸⁰³ Arranging meetings, personal inquisitions of her, even simply the fact of his caring for her, all added force to this new found sense of masculinity.

⁸⁰⁰ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 463.

⁸⁰¹ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 257.

⁸⁰² Bennett, *Clayhanger*, see p. 210, pp. 211-212, p. 223, and p. 231.

⁸⁰³ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 257.

But that night he was a man. She, Hilda, with her independence and her mystery, had inspired him with a full pride of manhood.⁸⁰⁴

This preoccupation with gender distinction is understandable given the moral and social climate of the era. Because gender idealism was so intrinsic to much nineteenth-century public discussion, there is little doubt that such concepts, whether wittingly or unwittingly, would have established themselves in the minds of many of Bennett's readers. It would have been no surprise to them that many of Bennett's young and inexperienced characters automatically compared these ideals with the reality that they were beginning to experience. This helps to explain, for instance, why Emanuel Prockter's overly exaggerated and overly dramatic singing of sentimental love songs is considered foolishly and grossly unmanly in the often comical *Helen with the High Hand*; and, why Edwin is somewhat repulsed when initially confronted with Hilda's dark, brooding appearance – looks that he immediately labels 'less feminine than masculine'.⁸⁰⁵ Expectation of the fulfilment of gender ideals also helps to account for various sensations of relief or gratitude. For example, Hilda recalls, with an evident sense of relief, the dream she harbours of marrying a man stronger and with more public and worldly experience than herself.⁸⁰⁶ Her anxieties about her future are sometimes relieved with thoughts of what she considers to be the likely prospect of marrying a man who is trained for a role for which, as a woman, she knows she is not prepared. And Constance Baines, although not consciously feeling relief, does feel grateful that her husband, Samuel Povey, is able to adopt the more masculine practice of disciplining their son, Cyril – a task for which her extreme maternal softness towards Cyril makes her particularly unsuitable.⁸⁰⁷

⁸⁰⁴ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 257. See also Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 267.

⁸⁰⁵ Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, chapter 26; and Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 196 and p. 206.

⁸⁰⁶ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 256.

⁸⁰⁷ For example, see Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, chapter 4.

Bennett's novels certainly suggest, then, that young men and women tended to possess strong ideas about the traits or characteristics that they thought would or should define femininity or masculinity even before experiencing courtship or marriage. More than this, his texts demonstrate that actual romantic experiences often served to rigorously test the validity of these previously-held notions. With regard to women, for instance – although it is not true for all – many of Bennett's heroines desire the men in their lives to be outwardly strong and decisive, to be fairly successful in their chosen careers and to have significant social standing. However, this author has too much respect for lived experience to permit the realisation of all of these romantic ideals. Therefore, what many of his female protagonists find is that discovering characteristics or inclinations contrary to the above ideals is not always tragic or even necessarily disappointing. Coming into contact with the more wistful or boyish elements of a lover's personality, for instance, is often embraced by women characters – primarily because it affords opportunity for the display of feminine comfort and care.

As another example, Hilda Lessways although she desires Edwin Clayhanger and George Cannon to possess a strong sense of masculine superiority, also finds that she enjoys experiencing feelings not only of feminine submissiveness but also of maternal nurturing. Constance Baines (*The Old Wives' Tale*) admires both Samuel's bedroom nervousness as well as his manly endeavour to hide this timidity. Somewhat differently, Anna Tellwright (*Anna of the Five Towns*) is both impressed by and attracted to Henry Mynors' experienced manliness and Willie Price's boyish weakness and vulnerability.⁸⁰⁸

Idealistic notions of male supremacy are alive in the minds of Bennett's female characters. One only has to look at Hilda Lessways' yearning to marry a man who

⁸⁰⁸ At various stages Anna, Hilda and Constance enjoy assuming a maternal manner with regard to the men in their lives: Anna towards the meek Willie Price, devastated by his father's bankruptcy and subsequent suicide; Hilda in relation to the over-worked appearance of her employer, George Cannon, and by Edwin Clayhanger's wistful honesty; and Constance towards her new husband's honeymoon nervousness. (See Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 176; Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 62, p. 101 and pp. 163-165; and Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 149.)

proves to be ‘subtle, baffling, and benevolent, and above all superior’; or at Sophia Baines’ enjoyment at playing ‘the ignorant uninitiated little thing’ in the presence of her worldly husband.⁸⁰⁹ However, these notions are often balanced by contrasting urges on the part of these women to exert strength of a maternal sort or to wield a sense of power or superiority of their own.⁸¹⁰

Bennett presents models of gender and romance that are significantly more complex and multi-layered, and therefore more realistic, than was allowed for in the era’s popular idealism. His comments on the varying desire for personal power on the part of both sexes reveal that the very Victorian notion of separate spheres was not clearly and neatly demarcated. There are a substantial number of incidents in Bennett’s books demonstrating that men and women did not always confine themselves to seeking a sense of power or self-worth only in the spheres allotted to or deemed appropriate to their sex. Indeed, these texts sometimes refer to direct inversions of common gender ideals. For example, Edwin Clayhanger envisages Hilda Lessways, not elevated or on a pedestal as mid-Victorian idealism called for, but in quite a different light:

he wanted her, piteous, meek, beaten by destiny, weakly smiling; he wanted her because she stood so, after the immense, masterful effort of the day, watching in acquiescence by that bed.⁸¹¹

Edwin wants her weak as well as strong. He wants her subservient as well as masterful. He wants her in her conquered state as well as to stand in awe of her.⁸¹² Edwin’s attitude towards Hilda in this instance exposes a paradox inherent in the

⁸⁰⁹ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 137; and Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, p. 305.

⁸¹⁰ For example, Sophia’s sole consolation, after she discovers that she has married a fool and not ‘a romantic and baffling figure’, is that her husband is a little afraid of her. (Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, p. 342.) Similarly, Hilda experiences a mixture of pride and of shame at the fact that her husband’s domination over her senses has come to an end. (Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 254.) And although she wishes that Edwin Clayhanger would be masculinely superior, she also reacts gloatingly to the fact that she knows more about certain topics than he does – take hymns, for instance. (Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 163.)

⁸¹¹ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 515.

⁸¹² See Bennett, *Clayhanger*, chapters 5 and 6 of Book 4 for much more on Edwin’s reactions to Hilda.

popular idealisation of femininity – one that acknowledged the spiritually superior status of women and yet recognised that they were also physically in need of protection – and therefore more vulnerable. Moreover, and on a slightly different note, Bennett further extends this inversion of gender idealisation. Contrary to applying to a woman this image of being mounted on a metaphorical pedestal, for example, Bennett applies it to a man – to George Cannon. At one stage, vividly aware of Cannon’s obvious masculinity, Hilda remarks – ‘there he was planted on his massive feet as on a pedestal’.⁸¹³ Gender idealism certainly influenced the minds of most of Bennett’s characters, male or female, so that one can extricate reactions ranging from comical observation to intense feeling, but it did not contribute to any notion of uniformity in thought or in behaviour regarding romantic relationships.⁸¹⁴



Attitudes to feeling and to reason in matters of love divide the novels of Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli, for it is in her highly escapist writing that romantic ideals and romantic sentimentality are allowed to preside over common sense and rational thought without any of the more painful, often irreversible, consequences detailed in Bennett’s fiction. So, whereas Bennett’s writing tends to explore the

⁸¹³ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 128.

⁸¹⁴ Such is the commonness of notions about superiority/inferiority, power, conquests and domination, in turn-of-the-century discourse, that such references also make it into many of Bennett’s less serious, more comical novels. And here Bennett has the freedom to comment with humour on a situation that sometimes profoundly affected the lives of his more serious characters; and indeed, on an ideal of gender that turn-of-the-century idealists, such as Corelli, took very seriously. There is a play on such ideas, for example, in *Teresa of Watling Street*, Bennett’s ‘fantasia on modern times’. Without much hint of the passionate romantic and sexual yearnings of characters like Hilda and Sophia, Bennett remarks of the hero, Richard, and the young heroine, Teresa: ‘A look of feminine appeal passed swiftly across her features. Fleeting as it was, it sufficed to conquer Richard. A minute ago he had meant to dominate her. Now he was dominated’ (Bennett, *Teresa of Watling Street*, p. 111.) It is telling that it is only in his much lighter or more escapist fiction, like *Teresa of Watling Street*, *The Card*, and *The Grand Babylon Hotel*, that Bennett can so dramatically simplify the typical complexities of his love scenes. Writing in a mode not quite as escapist as Corelli’s, but escapist nonetheless, Bennett has reason to make a determined effort to gloss over important or topical relationship issues, such as those to do with personal power and self-esteem, and romantic and sexual domination. For examples of the simplicity of many of Bennett’s more comical novels, see Bennett, *Teresa of Watling Street*, p. 139; Bennett, *The Card*, pp. 234-238; Bennett, *The Grand Babylon Hotel*, p. 231-232; and, although to a somewhat lesser extent, Bennett *Helen with the High Hand*, pp. 154-156.

conflict between romantic idealism and the likely actuality of intimate relationships, all the while maintaining an intolerant disdain for sentimentalism, Corelli's prefer to revel in portraying idealistic, other-worldly models of love and romance.

Corelli's novels create a romantic sanctuary for her readers. They supply a type of spiritual balm to soothe against the ravages of modern society. 'True' love is still alive, Corelli proclaims; it is just that its existence is sometimes overshadowed by Late Victorian disbelief and cynicism, and by the increasingly modern trend to concentrate attention on the tangible – on the bodily and the material. 'True' love, in her romances, is a transcendental experience – highly interior. Ideal partners are soul mates – men and women destined to be together, bound by a mysterious and sacred power. Corelli's concept of ideal love, then, incorporates more than the existence of a simple bond between romance and spiritual understanding. Rather, her brand of romantic idealism combines a complex mixture of mystical and otherworldly spirituality, as well as a general understanding of Christian morality and more specific notions related to firm religious belief. Corelli's endowment of love with a powerfully mystical hue works to draw attention away from what she believes is her society's growing focus on the sexual aspects of romantic partnerships.⁸¹⁵ Emphasis on the idea of the existence of a spiritual bond between male and female lovers – men and women invariably sexually involved – acts to sever love from its cruder, more physical counterpart, sexual desire or, more bluntly, lust. Furthermore, the whole notion of soul mates bestows a religious, an almost sacred, honour on romantic relationships – covering both the physical and the emotional elements. And this technique of spiritual and religious emphasis represents a very clever compromise on the part of Corelli, whose plots, more often than not, include sensational stories of sexual deviance. The sexual aspects of love are never denied in her writing, but they are embellished with a kind of spiritual romanticism, a technique which allows her to assert the sacredness of all

⁸¹⁵ See following chapter on 'Sexual Desire' for a more detailed commentary on sexual attitudes during this era.

of the facets of real love, while simultaneously portraying and criticising pure sexual desire.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Corelli's books attained such high sales figures considering the many varied dimensions of her fantasies – the sacred or religious tone, the chivalric romance, and the sexually charged storylines. Her handling of love and sex also suggests that she would have had varied appeal – the extent of her popularity further endorsing such a view. That is to say, that her novels would have represented an alluring and easily accessible source of escapism both for readers not yet experienced in matters of romantic love and sex, readers no doubt like many of Bennett's young women who were often naive and highly susceptible to romantic ideals, as well as for those members of the reading public who were already familiar with the more commonplace or mundane 'reality' of intimate relationships and of married life.⁸¹⁶ Furthermore, judging by their inescapable religious and moral tone, her heavily didactic novels are also likely to have attracted those who desired firm moral guidance in matters concerning romantic relationships.

And, finally, in a society where shifting educational and employment opportunities denoted an increased blurring of gender distinctions, Corelli's romantic fantasies provided her audience with the idealistic assurance that masculinity and femininity were still very desirable, safely guarded notions. 'True' love serves to confirm the separateness of each gender. In Corelli's ideal world, the laws of chivalry rule. Men then are masculine, worldly, strong and protectively superior. Women are innocent, constant, spiritual and femininely fragile. There are no instances in Corelli's novels of men desiring to see women both beaten and masterful, as there

⁸¹⁶ Although her novels enjoyed a wide audience, both male and female, it is probable that her dreams of spiritual romanticism were more directly targeted towards her female readers. For a discussion of the likely make-up of Corelli's audience, see chapter 1 of this thesis, 'A History of Women's Emotions Using the Novels of Bennett and Corelli'.

are in Bennett's.⁸¹⁷ Corelli's women deserve only sheltering and protection. Furthermore, love is especially important to her definition of femininity. More than anything else, how a woman reacts to the presence of love in her life proves or disproves the extent of her womanhood. Quite simply, if a woman embraces love, even if she is misled as to the extent of its sincerity or its depth, then her femininity is assured. If she rejects true love, for whatever reason, then she is deprived of her right to claim femininity. However, Corelli also acknowledges that in Late Victorian and Edwardian England, not all women are guaranteed the opportunity to marry. And so, she modifies her ideal of womanhood to allow for this. With the character of Mavis Clare (*The Sorrows of Satan*), for instance, she creates room for the single woman. Nevertheless, recognition of the fact that economic and social changes are taking place that deprive a substantial number of women from fulfilling some of the gender requirements expected of them, also pushes Corelli to pursue the protection of gender idealisation with an unsurpassable degree of vigour and zeal.

Corelli's novels demonstrate that she is markedly more protective of sexual differentiation regarding love and romance than any other facet of turn-of-the-century life. And given the escapist intent of her fiction and the social and moral conditions of her society, this is understandable. It is much more difficult to ignore the very visible changes taking place in the public sphere of employment, for example, than any less tangible transformations affecting such an intensely personal and private realm as romantic love. Moreover, her spiritual reassurances as they apply to romance are impossible to either prove or disprove. Doubtless it occurs to many late twentieth- and early twenty-first century readers that Corelli's approach to women in romantic relationships may well represent an attempt to compensate for the fact that her fictional escapism is often forced to acknowledge that changes are taking place in the public sphere have direct bearing on the position of women. Her technique, it seems, is to withdraw from a recognition of

⁸¹⁷ The instance referred to here is that discussed on p. 279 of this chapter where Edwin Clayhanger is attracted to an image of Hilda Lessways that promotes both her strength and her weakness. See

an external 'reality' and to retreat, as far as possible, into notions of gender idealisation as they concern interior issues such as love and romance.

Corelli's novels reveal a general sense of disillusion with 'modern' concepts of love and the contemporary reality of marriage. They react against what she identifies as a fall in constancy and a rise in the belief that love is all too fleeting an emotion and an experience; an increasing tendency to value sexual gratification over loving companionship; and a void in relation to the spiritual and the intellectual elements of romantic relationships.

Corelli's solution to all of this is the wholehearted promotion of her particular brand of romantic idealism. For the most part, this involves evoking nostalgic images of an ideal past and contrasting them with those of a decadent and cynical modernity.⁸¹⁸ On occasions, her novels also explore the world of children – establishing a model of life analogous to the adult world of her readers. Such techniques allow the performance of a number of tasks that are pivotal to Corelli's type of literary romanticism. In the first place, invoking a idealised past where chivalry reigned serves to confirm that ideal love is possible – that it once lived and that, given Corelli's recipe for success, it can again. Secondly, setting a love story against the backdrop of a child's world works to remove it from the taint of the cynically corrupt adult world, thereby allowing the depiction of sexual interest without the threat of sensuality intruding. Moreover, invoking images both of the nobility of chivalry and the innocence of children permits the depiction of the ideal female lover – an absolutely essential ingredient in Corelli's romantic explorations – innocent, pure and accepting of male supremacy.

also, Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 515.

⁸¹⁸ This tendency to invoke images of an ideal past is not confined solely to Corelli's books. It was a popular practice during a large part of the nineteenth century. For a discussion of nineteenth-century concepts of ideal love and chivalry, for example, see Marc Girouard, *The Return to Camelot. Chivalry and the English Gentleman*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1981.

Corelli's many novels argue that a growing emphasis on individualism and materialism in an increasingly urban, consumerist society robs love of its proper spiritual dimension. Consequently, love often amounts to inconstancy and impurity. In *The Master-Christian*, for instance, she contends –

“In love,” is a wide term nowadays, and covers a multitude of poor and petty passing emotions, - and it is often necessary to add the word “really” to it, in order to emphasize the fact that the passion has perhaps, - and even then it is only a perhaps, - taken a somewhat lasting form.⁸¹⁹

And this pessimism assumes as even more dangerous height of disillusionment in *The Life Everlasting*, where Corelli significantly, but not completely, renounces the validity of the legal tie represented by marriage –

if the passion existed in its truest form between man and woman any sort of legal tie would be needless, – as love, if it *be* love, does not and cannot change. But it is no use discussing such a matter with him [Rafel Santoris – the narrator's soul-mate]. The love that he believes in can only exist, if then, once in a thousand years! Men and women marry for physical attraction, convenience, necessity or respectability, – and the legal bond is necessary both for their sakes and the worldly welfare of the children born to them; but love which is physical and transcendental together, – love that is to last through an imagined eternity of progress and fruition, this is a mere dream – a chimera!⁸²⁰

Worldly knowledge reigns over innocence. The corruption, decadence and vanity that inevitably stem from this knowledge rules over purity of thought, then. With this loss of innocence comes the loss of youth, of faith, and of a whole idyllic way

⁸¹⁹ Marie Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, Methuen, London, 1900, p. 204.

⁸²⁰ Marie Corelli, *The Life Everlasting. A Reality of Romance*, Methuen, London, 1911, p. 210.

of life. Lucio, Corelli's creation of a benevolent Satan in *The Sorrows of Satan*, laments this loss:

But now there are no lads and lasses, - enervated old men
and women in their teens walk the world wearily,
speculating on the uses of life, - probing vice, and sneering
down sentiment, and such innocent diversions as the
Maypole no longer appeal to our jaded youth.⁸²¹

In this 'modern' world, love risks being mistaken for lust – risks being misunderstood as 'the mere mating of the male and female animal, - a coarse bodily union and no more'.⁸²² Concentrating purely on sexual desire, Corelli warns, erases 'all the finer and deeper emotions which make a holy thing of human wedlock'.⁸²³ Love and lust, then, are as different from each other as light is from darkness.⁸²⁴ Moreover, whereas true love lasts forever, mere physical attraction 'soon palls'.⁸²⁵

Romantic relationships, *The Sorrows of Satan* argues, should possess -
the mutual respect, the trusting sympathy, - the lovely
confidence of mind with mind, the subtle inner spiritual
bond which no science can analyse, and which is so much
closer and stronger than the material, and knits immortal
souls together when bodies decay.⁸²⁶

Faith in the value of a list such as this provides affirmation of spiritual existence in an ever-increasingly material world. The widespread desire for, and indeed existence of, such emotions represents a stance against a general fear that only that which can be scientifically proven is real. And, of course, Corelli's romantic escapism rests on acceptance of her assurances that true love – love of a spiritual

⁸²¹ Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan or The Strange Experience of One Geoffrey Tempest, Millionaire. A Romance*, Methuen, London, 1895, p. 262.

⁸²² Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 304.

⁸²³ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 304.

⁸²⁴ Corelli, *The Life Everlasting*, p. 243.

⁸²⁵ Corelli, *The Life Everlasting*, p. 245.

⁸²⁶ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 304. For reiteration of this idea of 'immortal souls', see Corelli, *The Life Everlasting*, p. 244.

nature – is still alive. After all, faith in this helps to sell her phenomenally popular books. The problem, however, is that there are simply too many obstacles in the way of its realisation.

There's as much romance in the modern world as in the ancient; - the human heart has the same passions, but they are more deeply suppressed and therefore more dangerous. And love holds the same eternal sway – so does jealousy.⁸²⁷

Human nature is still capable of love, but the complications of modern life and the contemporary fashion for pessimism, atheism and soulless materialism act to smother, though not kill, this sentiment. Hope is still very much alive, as her highly idealistic novels demonstrate, but it needs reviving.

The distinctions between the nostalgically innocent world of the Maypole and the decadence of turn-of-the-century society is further pointed out in Corelli's novels with the use of a number of rather obvious, even crude, techniques. In the first place, this aim is achieved with the presentation of a series of dramatic sketches that highlight the gulf existing between Corelli's concept of an idyllic chivalric past and her portrait of a corrupt and soulless present. In *The Sorrows of Satan*, these sketches are played to a theatre-going audience composed mainly of decadent aristocrats who do not appreciate the moral of the tales. Doubtless, popular anti-aristocratic sentiment existing at the time contributes towards the appeal of scenes such as this. Moreover, Corelli's belief that the era is marked by a lack of a collective moral conscience is used to provide solid evidence that turn-of-the-century society needs books such as hers.⁸²⁸ Obviously, Corelli's fictional theatre-going aristocrats did not relish moral instruction under the guise of entertainment as her largely middle-class and upper-working class readers did. The moral indignation of her vast audience was assured, if only by the fact that her constant moralising and didacticism left little, if any, room for dissent of any kind.

⁸²⁷ Corelli, *The Life Everlasting*, p. 232.

And, secondly, as has been mentioned, Corelli uses her depictions of the innocence of childhood to draw further attention to the supposed decadence of ‘modern’ society. This desire for innocent love in a world where, as Corelli certainly believes, knowledge of sex is increasingly accessible, helps to explain why this author uses children to furnish one of her stories about unspoiled love. Children provide this sought-after innocence. Lionel and Jessamine are employed as impeccably innocent vehicles with which to explore the more adult emotions of romance, loyalty and religious disbelief. In the creation of an innocent world, analogous to that of adult society, Corelli finds a model of chivalry and ideal love closer to her readers than a past far removed (the use of either a distanced past or unreal world of children, in actuality, exemplifying just how unreachable her proffered dreams actually are). In this perfectly constructed realm, men, represented by the eleven year old Lionel, and women, by the six or seven year old Jessamine, both sweetly conform to the roles deemed natural to them - with the use of children serving to emphasise that these roles are forged very early in life. Men should be gallant, protective gentlemen, as Lionel is; women should be pure and innocent, weak and ignorant, coquettes, yet angels, as Jessamine is – even at her very tender age. Indeed, the one-dimensional character of Jessamine acts to personify the ideal female lover – a woman who can manage to keep a ‘child’s heart and a child’s faith’ in a corrupt and cynical world.⁸²⁹

In a miniature world peopled by children, the mating-game of adults is presented in chivalric terms of maidens and heroes. And Corelli does this without ever threatening the delicacy of pure love. Jessamine, readers are informed, is the ‘little maiden’, the ‘little damsel’ – both guilty of ‘heavenly sweetness’ and ‘delicate

⁸²⁸ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, pp. 275-278.

⁸²⁹ Compare this with Lady Sibyl, Geoffrey Tempest’s ‘vile’ wife in *The Sorrows of Satan* who marvels at how the novel’s heroine, Mavis Clare, maintains her exemplary level of purity and innocence: ‘How that woman can keep her child’s heart and child’s faith in a world like this, is more than I can understand’. (Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 307.)

coquetry'.⁸³⁰ And Lionel is her young knight – a pursuing hero intent on avoiding his studies in order to meet with Jessamine –

in the same way as the scaling of walls and the ascending of fortified towers have suggested themselves to more mature adventurers as worthy deeds to be accomplished in the pursuit of the fair.⁸³¹

Any hint of sexual impropriety is eluded with Corelli's presentation of the mating-game as an innocent game of hide and seek:

Thus encouraged, Lionel ran, - actually ran, - a thing he very seldom did. He became almost a hero, like the big men of the 'Iliad'! His 'Helen' was 'a-hidin' round the corner', - he was valiantly determined to find her, - and after dodging the little white sun-bonnet round trees and over tombs till he was well-nigh breathless, she, like all feminine things, condescended to be caught at last, and to look shyly in the face of her youthful captor.⁸³²

The sexual nature of such a game is lightly but clearly implied. Lionel is not impervious to the 'deliciousness' of Jessamine's mouth; on the contrary, he experiences irresistible, though admirably embarrassing, urges to kiss her.⁸³³ However, in keeping with her promotion of romantic idealisation, Corelli portrays the whole idea of love and romance as pure – both in mind and in body – not a difficult task when the protagonists are children.

Corelli's disdain for animalistic sensuality within the sphere of romantic love is not in any way out of character for the era in which she produced her writing.⁸³⁴ Nor are her views solely confined to the more conservative elements of Late Victorian and Edwardian society. Feminists, too, harboured similarly moral views

⁸³⁰ Marie Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, Methuen, London, 1912 [1896], p. 56, p. 75, p. 53 and p. 75 respectively.

⁸³¹ Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, p. 75.

⁸³² Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, p. 46.

⁸³³ Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, p. 46.

⁸³⁴ Bédarida, p. 160.

on the issue. The late Victorian feminist campaigns, that largely supported the slogan ‘Votes for Women, Purity for men’, tended too to promote the ideal of a love free from the taint of sensuality. J. A. and Olive Banks argue that the

thoughts of these feminists were of a future society where marriage would be outdated and replaced by a more sensitive, spiritual, intellectual love.⁸³⁵

And such thoughts were not confined only to the more moderate stream of feminism. Lucy Bland makes similar assertions about the utopian visions of love held by more radical ‘new women’. In reference to Sarah Grand’s comments in *Lady’s Realm* in 1898, Bland claims that these women desired to banish the ‘brute’ in man – to create an ideal world which centred around love, not lust – the spiritual instead of the merely physical.⁸³⁶ Bland further argues that this view of love – one entailing a purified notion of sex – seems somewhat confused. It is not clear, for instance, what place the physical aspects of love are afforded in a model of marriage that should ideally be a ‘psychic alliance’.⁸³⁷

Such an element of confusion is present in Corelli’s fiction too. Rather than attempt to ascribe a proper place for this purified notion of sex, she prefers, on the whole, to ignore it. She condemns brute sensuality, but she does not remove sex from romantic relationships. She cannot do so, especially within the generous confines of escapist fiction, particularly when she largely elevates the role of motherhood as one of woman’s natural but honourable functions. Still, as has been said, Corelli is successful in avoiding discussions of the ‘proper’ role of sexuality. She manages to address this topic only directly when referring to sensational displays of sexual immorality, displays she vehemently condemns, concentrating instead on the spiritual bonds of love.

⁸³⁵ J. A. and Olive Banks, *Feminism and Family Planning*, p. 113.

⁸³⁶ Bland, p. 156.

⁸³⁷ Bland, p. 156.

The idea that men are the superior sex was so pervasive during this era that not even many of the more feminist-minded women challenged or refuted it.⁸³⁸ Needless to say, Corelli's novels certainly do not. Instead, like many of the more feminist-orientated sections of her society, even while simultaneously asserting recognition of female intellectuality and female moral responsibility, Corelli subscribes wholeheartedly to the doctrine of male supremacy.⁸³⁹ And all of her ideal women, and by inference ideal lovers, accept the truth of this view. There may be contradictions or paradoxes regarding this issue inherent in Corelli's narratives, like that existing with promotion of the image of the woman elevated on an idealistic pedestal and the opposing idea of the superior or elevated husband. But, whereas Bennett's female characters sometimes battle to see the superiority of masculinity reflected in their lovers and husbands and to align notions of male supremacy with their own feelings of superiority and powerfulness, Corelli's ideal women undergo few such struggles. A limited degree of tension does exist in Corelli's novels, but not to the extent that her heroines cannot easily overcome it.

The female narrator of *The Life Everlasting* exposes something of the tension existing between feminine idealisation and male supremacy. At one stage, for example, she makes the half-hearted effort to resist her soul-mate's assumption of male superiority:

Did he assume to master *me*? No! I would not yield to that! If yielding were necessary, it must be by my own free will that gave in, not his compelling influence!⁸⁴⁰

Here the paradox is obvious. She will not be forced to submit to notions of male supremacy; but she can choose to do so. And, inevitably, she does. In the end, his love for her begins to win her over. She ascribes this turn of events to recognition of the strength of his feelings – while continuing to assert, however, that the 'defiance' of her soul is as strong as the love which was beginning to 'dominate'

⁸³⁸ Bédarida, p. 120.

⁸³⁹ See, for example, chapter 5 'Employment and Careers'.

⁸⁴⁰ Corelli, *The Life Everlasting*, p. 234.

her.⁸⁴¹ Once she completes the transcendental journey that she initially embarks on in order to prove her spiritual worth to her superior lover, she ceases to resist his mastering. Her lover's spiritual mentor rewards her by saying:

I will give you credit for the true womanly feelings you have, that being conscious in your own soul of Rafael Santoris as your superior and master as well as your lover, you wish to be worthy of him, if only in the steadfastness and heroism of your character.⁸⁴²

And this sense of her own inferiority to her lover is all in spite of the fact that she has proved herself superior to most other men by even taking on this gruelling spiritual challenge in the first place. As this mentor again states:

But you have been bold! – though you are a mere woman you have dared to do what few men attempt. This is the power of love within you – that perfect love which casteth out fear!⁸⁴³

This mention of love is an extremely important qualifier. Whereas this statement seems to represent a forceful defence of the strengths of womankind, placing value on the female mind and spirit far above that of the ordinary run of mankind, it actually firmly entrenches women in the sphere conventionally allotted to them – the private sphere of love. Love explains her power. More than this, love is her power. What initially sounds like a strong feminist claim soon regresses into a reaffirmation of traditional ideals.

And, indeed, in her defence of female worth, Corelli is extremely careful not to challenge well-guarded notions of gender idealism. This female narrator, she claims for instance, is certainly worthy of her male lover, she is on a level plane with him, but only, she adds, in the 'steadfastness and heroism' of her character.⁸⁴⁴ What initially might strike the reader as a declaration of male and female equality

⁸⁴¹ Corelli, *The Life Everlasting*, pp. 234-235.

⁸⁴² Corelli, *The Life Everlasting*, p. 315.

⁸⁴³ Corelli, *The Life Everlasting*, p. 341.

⁸⁴⁴ Corelli, *The Life Everlasting*, p. 315.

soon becomes a reassertion of male supremacy. Still, this example does illustrate Corelli's technique of pushing for recognition of, and respect for, female intellectuality and her valuable place within romantic relationships, while at the same time reconfirming the viability of conventional ideals, especially as they concern male superiority.⁸⁴⁵

Corelli's brand of romanticism, therefore, despite acknowledging some of the more obvious transformations that her society is undergoing, does not permit her vast readership to forget or escape any of the still prevalent notions inherent in nineteenth-century gender idealism. Instead, her writing works hard to reaffirm their contemporary relevance. This is especially so when it comes to ideas about femininity and romantic love. Here she strenuously asserts that love is still very much located within the female area of concern. Her novels continually demonstrate that romantic love forms the truest test of a female's sense of womanhood. Subsequently, her fiction unrealistically segregates women into simple, clearly defined groups according to the nature of their feelings about and reactions to love. Heading her list are ideal women, and by inference, ideal lovers. This assembly is represented by women who embrace love whatever the consequences. At the bottom, there are the 'bad' or 'unsexed' women – women who reject the opportunities for securing love that come their way. The actions of this group are punished by their being robbed of their right to belong to the sisterhood of women, hence the reference to them as 'unsexed'. In between each of these poles is Corelli's small group of alternative 'good' women. This classification is comprised mainly of women who desire to wholeheartedly embrace love, but who are deprived of the chance to do so through life's

⁸⁴⁵ There are many other examples of the existence of this ambiguity between male superiority and male/female equality, if not exactly of female superiority, in Corelli's novels. *The Master-Christian's* Sylvie proves herself, not better than, but worthy of her future, spiritually superior husband. (Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, p. 523 and pp. 545-547.) In the same novel, Angela has the even greater task of proving herself spiritually strong enough to assist her husband in his worldly mission, as well as to face the wrath of certain corrupt elements of the public over the exhibiting of her work of art – one that is highly critical of the decadent ways of the world. (See Corelli, *The Master-Christian*.) Indeed, it is further indicative of the need for strong, superior guiding men, that *The Sorrows of Satan's* Lady Sibyl, who is damned to hell, has no such lover. Tempest himself, her weak-willed husband, realises this: 'I realized what an angel a little guiding

misfortunes. This last group represents Corelli's slant on the celibate female or 'spinster' who forms such an intrinsic part of Late Victorian and Edwardian discussion.

Most of this bestseller's 'good' female protagonists manage to find 'true' love – even if they have to overcome obstacles along the way. For instance, Angela Sovrani (*The Master-Christian*) has to battle a jealous lover before she finds her true soul-mate; Sylvie Hermenstein has to avoid the sexual temptation represented by a thoroughly decadent aristocrat; and the female narrator of *The Life Everlasting* discovers that she has to fight against disbelief and cynicism as she embarks on a spiritual journey to prove her worth to her soul-mate. And what is even more telling about these examples is the fact that Corelli rewards these women with tight-sealed assurances of their femininity because they are attracted to all forms of love, not just true love. That is to say, female vulnerability to love, even false love, is permitted, even admired, provided that these women do not transgress any moral boundaries and that they eventually find the true love that they so desperately seek. Corelli would rather women be misled by love of a false nature, than that they would reject all forms of love from the onset.

Angela Sovrani and Sylvie Hermenstein illustrate this effectively. The sylph-like Sylvie almost gives into the sexual temptation provided by the aristocratically decadent Marquis Fontenelle. She is on the verge of taking up his offer to become one of his mistresses because she believes that she is in love with him. She explains her thoughts to her friend, Angela –

He loves me for the moment, Angela, and I – I very much fear that I love him for a little longer than that! C'est terrible! He is by no means worthy of it, - no, but what does that matter! We women never count the cost of loving, - we simply love! If I see much of him I shall

love and patience might have made her,...and at last I pitied her'. (Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 472.)

probably sink into the Quartier Latin of love – for there is a Quartier Latin as well as a high class Faubourg in the passion – I prefer the Faubourg I confess, because it is so high, respectable, and clean, and grand – but –⁸⁴⁶

So strong is Corelli's insistence that love is necessarily womanly, that she effectively excuses Sylvie's temptation to 'fall' – it is all due to her suitably feminine weakness for love. It is unequivocally stated, however, that if, like Goethe's Gretchen, she had been tempted by jewels, then she would neither have been understood nor forgiven.⁸⁴⁷ Of course, such an argument on the part of Corelli concerning Sylvie's supposed naivety performs the task of helping her to explore the whole issue of women and sexual temptation without having to transgress the boundaries of respectability.

Furthermore, women can be deemed guilty of over-loving – but such a sin can be forgiven for it is just the fault of a virtuous woman. Still, an over-indulgence of love does threaten to turn the mid-Victorian ideal of womanly self-sacrifice into unwomanly self-gratification. The main character of *The Master-Christian*, Angela Sovrani, almost crosses this line. She loves and implicitly trusts her fiancé, Florian Varillo, almost to the point of obsession. This nearly blinds her to his faults, such as his jealousy of her superior artistic abilities. Indeed, she is really only awakened to the cruel extent of his jealousy when, in a sensational fit of rage, he stabs her. Still, like Sylvie, Angela is forgiven for her 'selfishness'. She loves to the point of obsession and, because of the blindness to Florian's true personality, she loses the opportunity to morally reform him. However, her misjudgment is truly womanly.

Full of rare perceptions and instinctive knowledge of persons and motives, she could only be deceived and blinded where her deepest affections were concerned, and

⁸⁴⁶ Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, p. 161.

⁸⁴⁷ Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, pp. 164-165.

there she could certainly be fooled and duped as
completely as the wisest of us all.⁸⁴⁸

Angela's example reveals another paradox, even contradiction, inherent within Corelli's notions of romantic idealism. Women are expected to be innocent. But womanly innocence does not serve Angela well. It is only when Angela matures, when she gains awareness of the sordid reality of the world around her, that she is rewarded with true love. After adopting a more cynical view of the world, a cynicism she critically portrays in her artistic masterpieces, she earns the love of her true soul mate, Aubrey Leigh. And, unlike the selfishly claustrophobic form of love she experienced with Florian, this essentially perfect couple share their love with the rest of the world.⁸⁴⁹

However, although many of Corelli's female characters pass the test of womanhood set by love, numerous others fail it. Judith Iscariot in *Barabbas* fails it initially because she rejects any sincere love directed at her and instead falls for a married man's powers of seduction. By the novel's end, however, she has redeemed some of her femininity by opening her mind to the true possibility of, if not exactly love, then the very closely related matter of religious faith.⁸⁵⁰ An equally, if not more shocking, portrait of failed femininity is Lady Sibyl in *The Sorrows of Satan*. Lady Sibyl is condemned to hell principally because she does not embrace romantic love. In an affront to her sex, she deliberately turns down an offer of what, at least on the surface, is 'ideal' love. Geoffrey Tempest offers to adore her after the 'queenly' fashion – to use John Ruskin's mid-Victorian term. At one stage he declares:

You are too good for me, Sibyl, - too good for any man, - I
am not worthy to win your beauty and innocence. My

⁸⁴⁸ Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, p. 95. Corelli cleverly includes herself in this comment even though she is a single woman, thereby also showing that she is typically feminine – attacking any stereotypical prejudices linking celibate women with anomalies of womanhood.

⁸⁴⁹ That Angela is shown the error of her ways, the selfishness of her love for Florian, by two male characters, her uncle, Cardinal Bonpré, and the child-Christ character, Manuel, further consolidates Corelli's gender idealism. These two males, superior in worldly knowledge, both try to protect and to teach her.

⁸⁵⁰ Marie Corelli, *Barabbas. A Dream of The World's Tragedy*, Methuen, London, 1907.

love, my love - do not give way in this manner... What can I say to you, but that I worship you with all the strength of my life, - I love you so deeply that I am afraid to think of it; it is a passion I dare not dwell upon, Sibyl, - I love you too well, - too madly for my own peace -⁸⁵¹

And, for her part, Sibyl seems to fulfil the role of affected heroine as she clings to Tempest, to his mind like 'a wild bird suddenly caged'.⁸⁵² But the true test of womanhood arrives when, reading her 'clinginess' as surrender, Tempest kisses her passionately. Lady Sibyl fails the test of true womanhood when she feels nothing during, or after, this display of intimacy. She tells Tempest this, and reveals that she cannot feel – that, as a 'modern' woman, she can only think and analyse.⁸⁵³ She does not surrender to emotions of love – the emotions Corelli's audience would expect of a heroine. But it is worthy of note that it is not the conventional idea of womanhood that enthralls them - not as much as deviations from the well-versed and well-known ideal.⁸⁵⁴ Still, for her crimes, Lady Sibyl is 'unsexed'.⁸⁵⁵

Again, what is particularly revealing about many of Corelli's narratives is her insistence on women being inherently loving, and her simultaneous and equally strong insistence on presenting sensational stories about unloving women. She

⁸⁵¹ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 199.

⁸⁵² Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 199.

⁸⁵³ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 199.

⁸⁵⁴ Lady Sibyl's reactions are discussed in much greater detail in the chapter on 'Sexual Desire'.

⁸⁵⁵ Mrs Valliscourt is similarly 'unsexed' in *The Mighty Atom* for abandoning her husband and her son for an adulterous affair. (Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, pp. 130-139.) The rule about embracing love is not limited to single women. Married women are subject to the same conditions. And here, Corelli does not abandon her well-used technique of establishing a simple dichotomy between 'good' women and 'bad' women, which acts to ensure that her moral message about ideal femininity comes across with abundant clarity. In *Barabbas*, for example, she contrasts an ideal woman and subsequently her ideal marriage, with an 'unwomanly' woman and her 'bad' marriage. She contrasts Justitia Pilate, wife of Pontius Pilate, with Rachel, wife of the High Priest, Caiaphas. Both women tend to their sick husbands, but Justitia does so with love and warmth, whereas Rachel does so with a 'frigid exactitude'. (Corelli, *Barabbas*, for Justitia, see chapters 24 and 25, especially p. 224, p. 227 and p. 243; and for Rachel, see pp. 404-405.) Justitia is an ideal woman; Rachel is not. The fact that Rachel's husband is a cruel adulterer who has no respect for his wife, earns her some sympathy. But her inability to love because of his treatment still robs her of her womanhood. Even the 'fallen' women in the novel, Judith Iscariot and Mary Magdalen, are assured of their femininity because of their willingness to embrace love.

attempts to align these opposing notions in her novels by presenting these extraordinary stories and then by ‘unsexing’ these women. She does not have to explain to her audience where these deviant women fit on the ‘womanhood spectrum’ because she completely removes them from it. Furthermore, her overwhelmingly popular stories also demonstrate a general mentality shift – from the perception that marriage confirmed womanhood to that which claims that love itself does. In Corelli’s novels, it is not marriage that makes a difference to definitions of womanly and unwomanly. The argument that marriage is just an external display, a legal bond, increasingly finds a voice in this turn-of-the-century fiction. Corelli contends that it is what is on the inside that really matters – and by doing so, she lessens the impact of the Victorian married woman/‘spinster’ divide as she transfers it to the loving woman/unloving woman parallel. Consequently, she creates room for her society’s growing number of unmarried women, herself included, on the spectrum of femininity.

Corelli’s fiction cannot endorse the actions of those women who deliberately reject love, but it can accommodate women who, as circumstances dictate, have to live without love. Marie Corelli justifies the single woman’s existence without seeming to directly challenge the nineteenth century’s accepted or ideal notion of womanhood. Prince Lucio, a representation of Satan, acting as society’s voice of concern, questions Mavis Clare about her unmarried state:

But – you are still a woman – and there is one thing lacking to your life of sublime and calm contentment – a thing at whose touch philosophy fails, and wisdom withers at its root. Love, Mavis Clare! – lover’s love, – devoted love, blindly passionate, – this has not been yours as yet to win! No heart beats against your own, – no tender arms caress you, – you are alone. Men are for the most part afraid of you, – being brute fools themselves, they like their

women to be brute fools also, – and they grudge you your
keen intellect, – your serene independence.⁸⁵⁶

Before Mavis even replies, Corelli has slipped in the first defence, or justification, of her status – Lucio helps her out by declaring that men are afraid of intellectual women. He then attempts to help her even further by offering to bring suitors to her so that she will not grow old and bitter.

Mavis, unfettered by Lucio's opinions, answers him by saying that he may well be right by claiming that 'love and marriage' are the only things that could make a woman happy. But she feels fortunate in her position and declares that she would not swap places with any of her married women friends – a statement that certainly implies that the single state can often be preferred to many actual Victorian marriages. She confesses that she has dreamt often of love - but if it is not God's wish that these dreams be realised – if she is to spend the rest of her days alone – then she accepts this and is content. Her substitute is her career, as she explains:

Work is a good comrade, - then I have books, and flowers
and birds - I am never really lonely. And that I shall fully
realize my dream of love one day I am sure, - if not here,
then hereafter. I can wait!⁸⁵⁷

Mavis' reply fulfils all Corelli's expectations of womanhood. Her idea of love is spiritual; it transcends common earthly notions of male and female union. Her faith in God's will, in the life hereafter, only recommends her as the perfect woman - given her life's circumstances – that is, that she has not found love and so is not a wife or a mother.

Reverting to the spiritual dimension, a popular recourse in the decades surrounding the turn of the century, effectively bridges the gap between ideal expectations of womanhood and Mavis Clare's actual situation – spirituality offering neither the opportunity for proving or disproving the usefulness of this compromise or the

⁸⁵⁶ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 347.

⁸⁵⁷ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 348.

workability of this solution.⁸⁵⁸ Nevertheless, this move on the part of Corelli does succeed in confirming the establishment of an alternative model of womanhood – one that is in no way unrespectable or offensive, even to those among the general reading public harbouring strong idealistic notions.



The novels of Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli pursue very different paths in relation to love and romance. Corelli's books deplore the lack of romantic sentimentality in a 'modern' world that pays too much attention to the so-called 'realities' of romantic relationships – including sexual gratification, distrust, betrayal and an absence of spiritual belief. Bennett's fiction, on the other hand, argues that chasing dreams of romantic sentimentality only leads to frustration and disappointment. Without denying the importance of love, Bennett's stance is that, in a world where far too many young men and women have limited access to mixed socialising and even less to divorce, concern for pragmatism outweighs that for romantic idealisation in making decisions about romantic relationships. The results that such decisions yield are all too real and all too lasting.

Significantly, neither author shows much interest in depicting the everyday 'reality' of loving relationships in any great detail – unlike the novels of mid-Victorian writers, like Anthony Trollope, which often reflected a general interest in notions of love and companionship as these were played out in courtship and marriage.⁸⁵⁹ Instead, Bennett and Corelli's novels mirror a widespread public concern with the likely impact of moral, social and economic shifts on ideas of romantic love, and on models of romantic relationships. However, each author reacts differently to the changes taking place in their wider society. In relation to love and marriage, for instance, Corelli continues to promote the view that these

⁸⁵⁸ See chapter 6 'Religion and Spirituality' for a more detailed discussion.

⁸⁵⁹ See Sharon Crozier, *Trollope: Grist for the Historian's Mill*, Honours History thesis, Flinders University, Adelaide, 1995.

are, and should be, mutually beneficial to both men and women. Recognition of what she perceives as ‘modern’ obstacles in the way of achieving love of a true and spiritual nature, only serves to persuade her to reaffirm the value and the significance that romantic love should hold. Bennett, on the other hand, with a closer affinity to realism, emphasises the point that, contrary to being mutually beneficial, experiences of love and marriage can bring different types of advantages and disadvantages to each sex. In *Hilda Lessways*, for example, he points out that, whereas marriage hardly impacted on George Cannon, it had profound repercussions on the life of the ‘new woman’, Hilda Lessways:

His existence went on mainly as before; hers was diverted,
narrowed – fundamentally altered.⁸⁶⁰

Bennett’s respect for lived experience, however, does not mean that he denies the place of gender idealisation in turn-of-the-century society. Like Corelli, his writing confirms that such notions manage to retain their relevance and their popularity, even in the face of a shifting reality – or perhaps even because of this shifting reality. However, while Bennett’s novels suggest that idealistic notions, like male supremacy, continue to exercise a hold over many middle-class female minds, his books also argue that there is often little realisation of these ideals. On the other hand, Corelli’s fiction, favouring the idea that these ideals need defending in an increasingly transitional society, reshapes gender ideals, especially as they apply to feminine concerns, and invests them with a strength and a force that even threatens to surpass that of the mid-Victorian ideal.

Comparing and contrasting the very different texts of Bennett and Corelli, then, helps to reveal to historians the ways in which such ideals were developed or operated during this period. Both authors hail from the same social and moral environment. Both write from a position that is grounded in contemporary ideal notions. But each writer works out the value and impact of these ideas differently. One uses them to direct her romantic fantasies, the other to contribute to his

⁸⁶⁰ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, pp. 256-257.

portraits of a familiar, everyday reality. And taken together, they help to build up an image of turn-of-the-century English society in which gender idealism continued to prevail – the impact of such notions certainly not being confined to the much-publicised mid-Victorian period. Romantic ideals, guided to varying degrees by appropriate notions of femininity and masculinity, were not in any way obsolete by the Edwardian years. Indeed, they were still alive to the point that even the most realistic of contemporary observers and commentators could not escape their weight and import.

Chapter 8

Sexual Desire

Victorian reticence on the subject of sexuality is renowned – as Patricia Anderson points out, sex was not a topic that Victorians talked about ‘constantly and graphically’.⁸⁶¹ This helps to account for what many historians consider to be the ‘vexing question of Victorian women’s sexuality’ – vexing, not only because of the continuing controversy over the degree of accuracy of the stereotype of the sexless female and the morally repressed society, but because of the difficulties involved in unearthing enough evidence to support theories concerning this very individual and private issue.⁸⁶² As Patricia Branca so succinctly articulates it, ‘moments in the bedroom are not recorded for later observers’.⁸⁶³ Michael Mason and Gertrude Himmelfarb, too, admit that the indirect and incomplete nature of the available evidence about sex render it ‘hard to speak confidently about Victorian sexuality – even about ideas of sexuality, let alone practices’.⁸⁶⁴ This relative lack of available material may hinder a study of Victorian sexuality, but by no means makes it impossible. It does, however, promote the usefulness of the turn-of-the-century novel for its historical insight.

Female sexuality often plays a pivotal role in the very different novels of Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli. Bennett directs his form of fictional realism towards portraying the effects of sexual feelings on the minds and lives of his young

⁸⁶¹ Anderson claims that sex ‘remained primarily an experience of the body, and not an exercise in words’. (Patricia Anderson, *When Passion Reigned. Sex and the Victorians*, BasicBooks, New York, 1995, p. 5 and p. 23.)

⁸⁶² See M. Jeanne Peterson, *Family, Love and Work in the lives of Victorian Gentlewomen*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1989, p. 63.

⁸⁶³ Patricia Branca, *Silent Sisterhood. Middle Class Women in the Victorian Home*, Croom Helm, London, 1975, p. 124.

⁸⁶⁴ Although Himmelfarb does contend that there is enough evidence to suggest that ‘the conventional view of sexual repression is much exaggerated’. This shortage of material suggests reticence, not necessarily prudery. Just because, in most cases, Victorian women did not flaunt their sexuality in public, and were relatively silent about it in diaries and letters, of course, does not automatically mean that they lacked all such passion and feelings. (Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Demoralization of Society. From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values*, A. A. Knopf, New York, 1995, p. 76; and Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1994, p. 128.)

female and male characters. Whereas Corelli often uses deviant notions of sexual desire as the basis for many of her sensational plots, as well as a springboard from which to launch into her heavily moral brand of didacticism. However, their insights and observations, their descriptions as well as unspoken but implied assumptions, do corroborate on several key issues.

In the first place, these popular turn-of-the-century novels frequently reflect images of women who are sexually self-aware. However, not content to confine their discussions of female sexuality, for example, to the evident desire to feel sexually appealing, these novels extend their commentary to incorporate actual feelings of sexual longing. In various ways, they demonstrate that it was certainly acceptable, even expected that women would feel sexual desire for their lovers and husbands. These fictional narratives confirm a recognition, and more than this, an acceptance, of female sexual desire – as opposed, that is, to numerous well-renowned denials of its existence, not least of which being the infamous writing of William Acton during the middle years of the Victorian era.⁸⁶⁵

Bennett's and Corelli's texts deny the idealistic mid-Victorian assumptions that women are or should be passive recipients of male sexual desire, supplanting this with the notion that they are quite pro-active in their sexual relations. However, neither author goes as far as to argue that women should be sexually knowledgeable, and they should certainly not be sexually aggressive. Instead, Bennett's plots draw on the often-negative consequences wrought by the meeting of passionate feeling and female sexual inexperience. And Corelli's novels, far from endorsing sexual assertiveness, strenuously affirm that sexually aggressive thought or behaviour on the part of women is to be deemed unwomanly. Nevertheless, it stands that the women in these texts do feel sexual desire, recognise that this is what they are feeling, and often enthusiastically embrace

⁸⁶⁵ An overwhelming majority of studies of Victorian sexual attitudes quote from, or at least refer to, Acton's argument, in *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, for example, that women were not bothered by sexual feelings of any kind. This issue will be discussed briefly again later in the chapter.

these sensations. Indeed, it is sometimes apparent that they embrace these feelings too readily and too warmly – a far cry from Acton’s sexless image of womanhood – and that this tends to lead to misguided decision-making, and ultimately to unhappiness, even to tragedy.

In the second place, acceptance of female sexual feelings as well as recognition of a tendency towards sexual naivety on the part of young middle-class women, leads Bennett and Corelli to recognise, even advocate, a subsequent need for varying degrees of control. For the most part, this need is depicted as an individually guided form of restraint, rather than as a more community-enforced sense of moral control. What these books help to demonstrate is that, while society was undergoing a process whereby restraints on discussions of sexuality were being loosened, the idea of controlling sexual behaviour had certainly not been abandoned. It had simply been transformed.

Whatever the extent of the difficulties involved in attempting to build up a picture of turn-of-the-century sexual attitudes, it is apparent that the notion of Victorian prudery, even hypocrisy, continues to hold influence. For many, the term ‘Victorianism’ recalls notions of middle-class hypocrisy and appearances of ‘respectability’, of sexual double standards, of sexual repression and extreme prudery – prudery to the point that, supposedly, piano legs had to be covered in order not to offend delicate sensibilities.⁸⁶⁶ Michael Mason suggests that even the term ‘Victorian’, when used to refer to something negative, ‘must convey the idea of moral restrictiveness, a restrictiveness that necessarily and even primarily applies to sex’.⁸⁶⁷ Furthermore, Victorian ‘respectability’ frequently continues to summon up the image of the pure ‘angel in the house’, the asexual middle-class wife, coexisting alongside that of the ‘fallen’ woman, often the prostitute, as well

⁸⁶⁶ Matthew Sweet is one of many who argue that there is no evidence at all that points away from simple reasons of cleanliness to those of extreme prudery for piano leg coverings. (See Matthew Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians*, Faber and Faber, London, 2001, p. xiii.) And Jose Harris claims that in carrying out the research for her book, *Private Lives, Public Spirit*, she came across ‘no real (as opposed to fabulous) Victorians who swathed their piano legs with nether garments’. (Jose Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914*, Penguin, London, 1994, p. 39.)

as the ‘hypocrisy’ of the middle-class male who apparently reaped the benefits of the convenient existence of both.

The ‘woman worship’ ideas of the mid-Victorian period help to account for the development of such notions of prudery. The origins of these thoughts are by now extremely familiar. Perkin, for one, explains that ‘an ideology about women emerged in the 1840s and 1850s which virtually denied women’s sexuality’.⁸⁶⁸ She describes these ideals as being the result of a ‘puritanical drive’ to civilise sex by ignoring it.⁸⁶⁹ Women, once deprived of these base, animalistic and degrading carnal desires, became mere ‘housewives’.⁸⁷⁰ Such idealistic views were supported by numerous scientific and medical writers – including Dr William Acton in *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*. Patricia Branca claims that ‘[book after book] written about the Victorians quote Acton as being representative of Victorian sex attitudes’ – indeed, to the point that Carol and Peter Stearns claim that his views are over-quoted.⁸⁷¹

However, this reputation for prudery was not one that many Victorians applied to themselves. For, as Mason argues, those living during the middle and later decades of the nineteenth century tended to consider themselves more morally liberated than earlier in the century when it was considered that ‘a climate of strict

⁸⁶⁷ Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, p. 3.

⁸⁶⁸ Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women*, New York University Press, New York, 1993, p. 64.

⁸⁶⁹ Perkin, p. 51.

⁸⁷⁰ Françoise Basch, *Relative Creatures. Victorian Women in Society and the Novel, 1837-67*, Allen Lane, London, 1974, p. 8.

⁸⁷¹ Branca, *Silent Sisterhood*, p. 124; and Carol and Peter Stearns, ‘Victorian Sexuality: Can Historians Do it Better?’, *Journal of Social History*, vol. 18, 1985, pp. 625-634, p. 627. Many writers, whether holding up Acton as representative of Victorian views, or simply referring to him as a commentator of the age on female sexuality, mention his opinions in their works: Peterson, p. 59; Daniel Pool, *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew: From Fox Hunting to Whist – The Facts of Daily Life in Nineteenth-Century England*, Touchstone, New York, 1994, p. 186; and Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, p. 195. Branca, for example, cites one passage of Acton’s: ‘the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feelings of any kind. What men are habitually, women are only exceptionally ... there can be no doubt that sexual feeling in the female is in the majority of cases in abeyance ... and even if roused (which in many instances it can never be) compared with that of the male. As a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself.’ (Branca, *Silent Sisterhood*, p. 124.)

moralism had prevailed'.⁸⁷² The cliché of 'Victorianism', and the stigma of and prudery attached to it, have instead been imposed by later generations – the origins of these thoughts having been traced by various commentators to the early decades of the twentieth century.⁸⁷³

There have been many revisions of this concept of prudery. Eric Trudgill is one among a large number of historians who point out that this clichéd concept of 'Victorianism' is a gross oversimplification of Victorian sexual views – one that ignores the variety and diversity of sexual attitudes existing during this long period.⁸⁷⁴ Furthermore, most historians now agree that Acton's assumptions about female sexuality, although typifying conservative ideology, were not fully representative of the attitudes of the age.

It is therefore generally accepted that, by the end of the nineteenth century, the argument that women were not bothered by sexual feelings had lost much of its sway. Additionally, by this time, discussions of a general sexual nature had entered more firmly into mainstream public discourse. This is partially evidenced, not only by the tone and content of popular fiction, such as that written by Bennett and Corelli, but also by the increasing availability of non-fictional publications whose subject matter included, among others, venereal diseases, prostitution, pornography and birth-control.⁸⁷⁵ By the end of the Victorian era, Banks further argues, consideration of certain sexual issues, including that of birth-control, had started to become more acceptable to a wider range of people than earlier in the period – people outside the medical profession, for instance.⁸⁷⁶

⁸⁷² Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, p. 12 and pp. 16-20.

⁸⁷³ Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, p. 12 and pp. 16-20; and Steven Seidman, 'The Power of Desire and the Danger of Pleasure: Victorian Sexuality Reconsidered', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1990, pp. 47-67, p. 47.

⁸⁷⁴ Eric Trudgill, *Madonnas and Magdalens. The Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes*, Holmes and Meier, New York, 1976, p. 6.

⁸⁷⁵ Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement*, Martin Robertson, Oxford, 1981, p. 182.

⁸⁷⁶ Banks, *Faces of Feminism*, p. 182.

Furthermore, and contrary to persisting stereotypes, there were also very tangible examples of acceptable female sexual expression common to everyday Late Victorian and Edwardian life. On the strength of these, many late twentieth-century publications on women in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century society agree that this very image of the asexual middle-class woman is not particularly persuasive. Joan Perkin and Patricia Branca, for example, argue that by the 1860s many young middle-class women were becoming increasingly ‘flirtatious’, even ‘sexually aggressive’.⁸⁷⁷ Further dispelling the myth of the sexless female is the observation that young middle-class women were beginning to place a greater degree of emphasis on personal appearance from an increasingly earlier age, a trend that was supported by the rising importance of the beauty industry and ever-changing clothing fashions throughout the century.⁸⁷⁸ Not only was an abundance of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fashion revealing enough to draw attention to different aspects of the female body that were considered to be particularly alluring during different phases of the period, such as well-developed busts, tapering waists and rounded hips, but, contrary to some statements arguing the opposite, the common use of skirts and petticoats tended to accentuate sexual attractiveness.⁸⁷⁹ Layers of skirting often drew attention to the body concealed beneath and to the ankles that were revealed below, they did not simply imply sexual modesty.⁸⁸⁰ Covering the body, then, is likely to have had as much to do

⁸⁷⁷ Perkin, p. 65. Branca adds that by this stage in the century, middle-class women did not automatically behave like ‘shrinking violets’ and as the century progressed, ‘they became increasingly bold in their contacts with the opposite sex’. Letters that appeared in the new girls’ magazines of the second half of the century make it quite clear, for example, that flirtation was becoming ‘a major preoccupation and pleasure’. (Branca, *Silent Sisterhood*, p. 127.)

⁸⁷⁸ See Branca, *Silent Sisterhood*, p. 127. Prudence Glyn supports the contention that an interest in fashionable clothing mirrored an interest in sexuality. It is widely agreed, she argues, that dress ‘is the cheapest, easiest and often, because unconscious, the truest reflection of how man feels’ – or, in this case, how woman feels. (Prudence Glyn, *In Fashion. Dress in the Twentieth Century*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1978, p. 14.)

⁸⁷⁹ Patricia Branca points out, the ideal lady’s figure of the 1870s entailed ‘a well-developed bust, a tapering waist (of eighteen inches) and full rounded hips’ – and stylish clothing was moulded to this image. (Branca, *Silent Sisterhood*, p. 127.) See also, C. Willett and Phillis Cunnington, *A Picture History of English Costume*, Vista, London, 1960, p. 93.

⁸⁸⁰ See Patricia Anderson, p. 10. The history of dress is a complex area of historical inquiry that can only be referred to very briefly in this chapter. In reference to one of the most popular fashions of the era, the crinoline, for example, James Laver, among other historians, argues that this article of clothing was in no way a ‘moral garment’. He asserts that the idea that the crinoline was a symbol of the ‘supposed unapproachability of women’ – due to the prodigious breadth of the skirt

with sexual expression as with sexual reserve. Yet, however revised histories of sex have been in recent years it seems that some of these stereotypes or myths persist in modern perceptions – they are alive enough for even the most recently published histories of Victorian sexuality, such as those written by Mason (1995) and Anderson (1995), to continue to refute them.

Further complicating this whole area of historical research is the fact that these revisions of the stereotype of Victorian sexual repression have in turn been met with counter-revisionist arguments.⁸⁸¹ The concern voiced by Carol and Peter Stearns and Steven Seidman, for instance, is that many revisionist histories of Victorian sexuality may be guilty of a degree of oversimplification and inaccuracy as a result of drawing on comparisons with today's Western sexual standards and levels of sexual conduct.⁸⁸² These historians strongly emphasise the significance of the complex nature of the relationship existing between culture and behaviour, thereby highlighting the need to carefully examine sexual feelings with a precise regard for time and place.⁸⁸³ In reference to the Victorian era, both Seidman and the Stearnses reaffirm the very 'real' importance of ideals of purity. They contend

– was a 'hollow sham'. Contrary to viewing it as a protective item, he refers to it as 'an instrument of seduction'. The crinoline moved readily and revealingly with a woman's body. As Laver explains, it was a style that was 'in a constant state of agitation', thrown from side to side, and it was short enough to show off a woman's ankles and the lower part of her legs, when sitting down or ascending stairs, for instance. (James Laver, *A Concise History of Costume*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1969, p. 184; Willett, p. 93; and Branca, *Silent Sisterhood*, p. 127.) Further fashionable developments were likewise sexually revealing. The 'stylishly form-fitting' dresses of the 1870s and 1880s not only 'hinted at the outline of a woman's legs when she walked but often, with or without movement, hugged the contours of her thighs so tightly that there was little left to the imagination'. (Anderson, p. 9.) Similarly, great stress was laid on the beauty and erotic appeal of a woman's neck and shoulders throughout this era – one only has to witness the great success of décolletages. (Willett, p. 93.)

⁸⁸¹ See for example, Seidman, 'The Power of Desire and the Danger of Pleasure', pp. 47-67; and Carol and Peter Stearns, 'Victorian Sexuality', pp. 625-634.

⁸⁸² This concern permeates most of this article written by Carol and Peter Stearns, 'Victorian Sexuality', pp. 625-634; and Seidman, p. 47.

⁸⁸³ Carol and Peter Stearns are not the only writers interested in this issue. The relationship between culture and emotions, in this case specifically romantic passion, and following that, romantic behaviour, is the central concern of a large collection of essays entitled *Romantic Passion. A Universal Experience?* edited by William Jankowiak. Within this volume, romantic passion is studied within single cultures (ranging from interest in the expression of this emotion in American polygamous communities and in Aboriginal Australia to countries such as China, Nigeria and Trinidad), thus facilitating cross-cultural comparisons. (See William Jankowiak (ed.), *Romantic Passion. A Universal Experience?*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995.)

that, far from being ineffectual, the mass of material that was published that either denied female sexuality or that claimed that women were less bothered by such sensations than men, had influence beyond the merely intellectual realm.⁸⁸⁴ These ideas, the Stearnes contend,

affected, indeed, largely determined, longstanding
legislation on censorship and the publicity of birth control,
both of which could influence actual sexual behaviour.⁸⁸⁵

However, Michael Mason, while endorsing the argument made by the Stearnses that Victorian ideals of purity may well have had widespread effect on society, an effect that certainly would have filtered down to individual thought and behaviour, also recognises that proving this is extremely tricky, if not impossible. He argues that it is enormously difficult to link, with any degree of accuracy, social etiquette and refined social behaviour with individual sexual attitudes. It is hard to even attempt to relate a woman's conduct in her drawing room with that in her bedroom.⁸⁸⁶

What complicates the whole issue of establishing nineteenth-century sexual attitudes further is the widespread influence of what Mason understands to be a genuine respect for sexual reticence during this era. He maintains that what many considered to be 'prudery' actually 'ran deep rather than shallow' – that an aspect of culture during this era was 'a genuine and deeply rooted commitment to a fineness or purity of tone in respect of sexual matters'.⁸⁸⁷ Not that reverence for such reticence was absolute. It was not expected to take the form of a 'militant belief'.⁸⁸⁸ Indeed, it is also very possible that punctiliousness in this respect was regarded as 'unfashionable' – especially considering that 'candour and intimacy in conversational etiquette between the sexes probably increased'.⁸⁸⁹ There is also

⁸⁸⁴ Carol and Peter Stearns, 'Victorian Sexuality', p. 628; and Seidman, p. 47.

⁸⁸⁵ Carol and Peter Stearns, 'Victorian Sexuality', p. 628.

⁸⁸⁶ Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, p. 127.

⁸⁸⁷ Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, pp. 132-133.

⁸⁸⁸ Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, p. 133.

⁸⁸⁹ Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, p. 133.

little to say that many within Victorian society took the implications of this use of sexual euphemisms as seriously as post-Victorian readers may have previously been led to believe. In support of this, Mason cites many instances of the contemporary media treating this whole issue in a humorous, even in a jocular, manner.⁸⁹⁰

Sexual reticence, therefore, did not mean silence on the issue; rather it pointed to the presence of an encoded discourse. Indeed, this widespread employment of sexual euphemism can also be used to illustrate just how aware Victorian and Edwardian society were of sexuality and of how much attention they paid to the whole subject. Repressing open expression of sexuality, according to Foucauldian thought, helps to place it at the centre of public discourse - as Jeffrey Weeks reiterates, it marks it as '*the secret*'.⁸⁹¹ And supporting this, Seidman argues that ideals of sexual respectability that endorsed reticence – ideals he maintains that were intended to curb, even control, the power of sexual instincts to elicit sensuality – demonstrate that, rather than 'denying and devaluing the importance of the sex instinct, Victorians assumed its omnipresence and power'.⁸⁹² Patricia Anderson agrees with this. She lends considerable support to the argument that those within Victorian society certainly understood passion and its implications. Cloaked references to sexuality actually facilitated open sexual discussion – surely

⁸⁹⁰ Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, pp. 126-127.

⁸⁹¹ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society. The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800*, Longman, London and New York, 1981, p. 19. William Cohen also remarks: 'Even without Foucault, we might have suspected from the Victorians that silence about sexuality composes a strategic form, not an absence, of representation'. The 'unspeakability' or unspeakable status of sexuality (whether through inability or prohibition), rather than functioning simply as prohibition for Victorian writers, actually afforded them 'abundant opportunities to develop an elaborate discourse – richly ambiguous, subtly coded, prolix and polyvalent'. Although his book refers specifically to sex scandal stories, it does also have considerable bearing on general fiction of the period. (See William A. Cohen, *Sex Scandal. The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1996, pp. 2-3.)

⁸⁹² Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, pp. 126-127; Weeks, p. 19; and Seidman, p. 49. In addition, Patricia Anderson argues that rather than repressing Victorian sexual expression, the common use of euphemisms allowed the 'free play of sexual feelings and meanings'. The increasing openness with which sexuality was discussed towards the end of the nineteenth century, then, according to Anderson, illustrates a willingness to 'eradicate the unfair inequities between men and women, and reduce the physical risks associated with sex'. Passion, she argues further, was understood by the Victorians. It existed in the open. Victorians were certainly aware that it existed. (See Anderson, p. 8 and p. 161.)

indicating that sex and sexuality were an accepted and important part of many Victorian lives.⁸⁹³

Popular novels, then, particularly lend themselves as sources to historians when investigating a period during which sexual reticence was so highly guarded. The widespread acceptance of and use of an encoded language enabled these books to discuss topics and express opinions on topics that were not necessarily written about or openly discussed elsewhere. Indeed, as Lucy Bland argues,

Nineteenth-century novels, particularly those by women, were conventionally the site for the exploration of love, marriage, family and (above all) the personal.⁸⁹⁴

Novels could even extend their literary explorations to include issues that usually faced silence or censorship – fiction such as that written by the more radical New Women novelists of the period who often broached topics like sexual intercourse or childbirth outside marriage.⁸⁹⁵ The use of verbal and literary euphemisms facilitated sexual debates within prescribed social boundaries. Novels, however euphemistic, accommodated a mass of ideas and a flow of discussion on the topic. Moreover, similar to Anderson's argument, surely the extensive use of euphemisms to discuss topics such as sexuality and sensual feelings in many of the era's popular novels strongly indicates that the issues that these authors discussed were those that their wide audiences already understood? This is so whether in reference to the popular fiction of the New Women authors or, more pertinent here, to writing by Bennett and Corelli. Corelli, for example, uses the term 'love' to cover both love and sexual desire, but each time she uses it she makes it abundantly clear to which understanding she is referring. In *The Sorrows of Satan*, for instance, Lady Sibyl declares that she is starving for 'love' – not 'the love of

⁸⁹³ Anderson, p. 161.

⁸⁹⁴ Lucy Bland, 'The Married Woman, the 'New Woman' and the Feminist: Sexual Politics of the 1890s', in Jane Rendall (ed.), *Equal or Different. Women's Politics 1800-1914*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, pp. 141-164, p. 155.

⁸⁹⁵ See, for example, Mérie Muriel Dowie's 1895 novel, *Gallia*, where the female protagonist, Gallia Hamesthwaite, challenges conventional notions about sexuality and about the supposedly rational place of marriage in Late Victorian society. (Mérie Muriel Dowie, *Gallia*, Everyman, London and Vermont, 1995 [1895].)

the fairy prince for the fairy princess', readers come to realise, but rather self-consuming lust.⁸⁹⁶ And, true to turn-of-the-century reticence about sexuality, Bennett refers to Hilda Lessways' obvious feelings of sexual desire for George Cannon as 'passion'. When contemplating her relationship with Cannon, Hilda 'wondered if she had ever had a real faith in him, whether – passion apart – her feeling for him had ever been aught but admiration of his impressive adroitness'.⁸⁹⁷ Bennett's language is somewhat encoded, but his calm and unruffled reference to 'passion' implies, not only that his contemporary audience doubtless knew to what he was referring, but also that 'passion' was certainly an expected part of Hilda's attraction to Cannon.

What all of this strongly suggests is that Late Victorian and Edwardian respect for sexual etiquette was genuine. Instead of representing a rejection of sexuality, this etiquette suggested a healthy regard for it, given that it occupied its proper place in society, for the most part, within the very private, acceptable confines of marriage. This argument, however, raises a number of queries regarding some key turn-of-the-century concerns, such as the range of sexual attitudes, sexual ignorance, sexual double standards and notions of purity – not least of these being how these concerns were positioned in the overall scheme of Late Victorian and Edwardian sexual attitudes?

In the first place, sexual attitudes were not all the same across Victorian and Edwardian society. A number of determinants came into play, including social class, geographical or regional background, and, of course, gender. With the limited space available here, it is impossible to explore with any semblance of a regard for detail the varying effects of region on sexual thoughts and behaviour. However, given the make-up of the general reading public, as well as the aims of

⁸⁹⁶ Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan or The Strange Experience of One Geoffrey Tempest, Millionaire. A Romance*, Methuen, London, 1895, pp. 269-270.

⁸⁹⁷ Arnold Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1976 [1911], p. 262.

this thesis, it is necessary to briefly address the more pertinent issues of gender and class.⁸⁹⁸

The whole issue of sexual ignorance is particularly helpful in shedding light on general attitudes towards gender, class and sexuality. As Bennett's and Corelli's novels illustrate, continuing popularity of the idea that women were to be subject to more stringent sexual standards than men was still very much in evidence at the turn of the century. For instance, whereas chastity before marriage was deemed desirable for men, it was considered necessary for women.⁸⁹⁹ This emphasis on controlling female sexual expression tended to begin in childhood, with the question of sexual education. Although it is generally agreed that levels of sexual naivety were likely to be higher among girls than boys, as Carol Dyhouse argues, there is not enough evidence available to be able to generalise about 'dominant patterns' concerning the sexual education of young girls.⁹⁰⁰ It is, therefore, extremely difficult to access just how much sexual knowledge was attained by young women before entering into romantic relationships and marriage.

Ideas of sexual respectability are more often than not associated with the Victorian middle classes. However, Mason contends that there was a growing, though not widespread, emphasis on incorporating various aspects of middle-class sexual attitudes, including parental reticence on the topic in the presence of children, into

⁸⁹⁸ See chapter 1 'A History of Women's Emotions Using the Novels of Bennett and Corelli' on make-up of the general reading public. Furthermore, for an example of historical investigation into the varying effects of region on sexual attitudes, see Jean Robin, *The Way We Lived Then*, Ashgate, Aldershot, Hampshire and Brookfield, Vermont, 2000 – a study of the market town of Colyton in east Devonshire in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and one that certainly portrays variations in sexual experiences between classes and regions.

⁸⁹⁹ J. A. and Olive Banks, *Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 1964, p. 107.

⁹⁰⁰ Dyhouse does state, however, that there are few oral historians around who have not uncovered stories about sexually ignorant girls. As evidence further illustrating that 'extreme ignorance about sexuality and reproduction pervaded all social levels', she also refers to the many letters sent to Marie Stopes in the 1920s seeking information or help on sexual matters. (Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, Boston and Henley, 1981, pp. 20-21.) This claim to the widespread existence of ignorance about the sexual facts of life is also supported by Bédarida. (François Bédarida, *A Social History of England, 1851-1990*, translated by A. S. Forster and Geoffrey Hodgkinson, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 149-152, p. 161.)

notions of working-class respectability towards the end of the nineteenth century.⁹⁰¹ He applies this argument to the working class of London in particular, adding that as a result of this shift, a substantial number of sons and daughters from this social stratum continued into adulthood ignorant about sexual matters. As for general levels of ignorance, he suggests that parental reticence to the point of ‘an actual exclusion of basic sexual knowledge from young people’s awareness’ was surely an ‘extreme’ reaction to prevailing standards of ‘respectability’, and one ‘which respectable opinion did not defend, and sometimes actively deplored’.⁹⁰² Nor, it is argued, did existing levels of Victorian and Edwardian sexual ignorance go entirely unchallenged during the era. New Women novelists of the 1890s, for example, often campaigned for sexual education by illustrating the potentially negative effects of naivety on the lives of young women in particular.⁹⁰³

Moreover, far from promoting the idea of sexual prudery or hypocrisy, many late twentieth century scholars agree that the maintaining of sexual ignorance was, in most cases, a protective measure.⁹⁰⁴ Young women were seen especially to be in need of protection from, among other things, the weight of sexual knowledge on the minds of the young and from the pain of unwanted pregnancies – an especially

⁹⁰¹ Mason does not link all notions of ‘respectability’ among the working class with sexuality. He contends, for example, that working-class notions of ‘respectability’ were more closely linked with ideas about domestic respectability than the much more middle-class notion of sexual respectability. (Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, for example, p. 160.) On a somewhat different note, François Bédarida supports the idea of high levels of working-class respectability, arguing that bourgeois morals of sexual respectability were widely accepted by the working classes – with recent oral tradition research showing that only some working-class circles as well as some country folk exhibited morals that were ‘more free and easy’ – language concerning sexuality being more direct, for instance. (Bédarida, p. 160.) As for the upper classes, Jeffrey Weeks argues that challenges to ruling-class immorality began as early as the late eighteenth century. Weeks contends that this challenge to ruling-class immorality can actually be traced back to the evangelical revival of the late eighteenth century which laid the foundations of nineteenth-century middle-class domestic ideology. (Weeks, p. 19.)

⁹⁰² Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, p. 141 and p. 133.

⁹⁰³ Bland, p. 153.

⁹⁰⁴ Sally Mitchell, *The New Girl. Girl’s Culture in England 1880-1915*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995, pp. 268-269; J. A. and Olive Banks, *Feminism and Family Planning*, p. 108; and Bland, p. 153.

pertinent issue in an age when contraceptive techniques were neither readily available or reliable.⁹⁰⁵

Indeed, the whole issue of contraception can be used to contribute towards two important points in this chapter. On the one hand, surely the increased discussion of and the acknowledged rising use of birth control helps to refute the very idealistic theory that all middle-class women were primarily interested in sex only as it concerned bearing children.⁹⁰⁶ On the other hand, and in spite of the slight increase in the production and availability of contraceptive devices, the continuing relative lack of availability and inefficiency of methods of contraception, could certainly help to account for some of the origins of the stereotype of the passionless female. Any lack of, or dislike of, sexual involvement on the part of a Victorian woman was much more likely then to be attributed to a fear of childbirth than to a lack of passion or sexual enjoyment. As Michael Mason comments:

The sad reality of a Victorian married woman's sex-life which modern prejudice has created, of joyless inhibition and ignorance, is quite unhistorical, but it must give way to a reality which may sometimes have been sadder: of women fearing and rejecting sexual pleasure because they above all wished to avoid having another child.⁹⁰⁷

It remains the case that the burden of sexual responsibility continued to be placed on women's shoulders at the turn of the twentieth century, but campaigns were definitely under way which aimed at raising male levels of sexual restraint. For example, the largely moderate Late Victorian and Edwardian feminists, although

⁹⁰⁵ For a more detailed discussion, see Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, chapter 2.

⁹⁰⁶ Branca, *Silent Sisterhood*, 128. Of course, improvements in the manufacture and availability of contraceptive techniques does not automatically point to their widespread use or even necessarily to evidence of sexual enjoyment. But it has been pointed out that the acknowledged, although gradual, rise in the use of contraceptive techniques, coupled with the nature of these actual techniques (even including withdrawal) is likely to have required simple agreement or even candid discussion between husband and wife in advance. (Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, pp. 126-127.)

⁹⁰⁷ Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, p. 203.

they recognised and campaigned against the sexual double standard (seen, for example, through their campaigns in the 1870s against the Contagious Diseases Acts), did not advocate a complete breakdown of middle-class ideals of purity.⁹⁰⁸ Instead, they promoted increasing this concept of purity to encompass men's sexual behaviour too.⁹⁰⁹

Restraint, therefore, was a key turn-of-the-century notion, for it was widely believed that the sexual instinct, if overindulged or if not controlled, had the tendency to dangerously deteriorate into animalistic responses – into eroticism and sensuality.⁹¹⁰ Following this, the picture that comes to mind when talking about Victorian and Edwardian sexuality is not one of repression and prudery. Nor is it one of extreme sexual openness. Rather, it is an image of a society that generally accepted the reality of sexual desire and pleasure, but at the same time that also acknowledged the dangers involved in too quick a transition from belief in a widespread sense of sexual restraint to a general support of individual sexual liberty. Certainly this is the picture that Bennett's novels portray. And a similar picture can even be accessed through Corelli's highly escapist literature, once her insistence on idealistic espousals have been taken into account.

One of the chief aims of this chapter is to throw some light on how 'ordinary' single middle-class women felt about sexual desire. Therefore, having briefly discussed the approach of current historical researchers to the general question of Victorian and Edwardian sexuality, especially female sexuality, it is appropriate to turn to a realm of investigation that is particularly pertinent to this study – that which analyses more personal accounts of the sexual feelings of turn-of-the-century women. There have been a number of recent important publications in this area. However, the task of penetrating women's inner lives, especially as far

⁹⁰⁸ For example, more morally and sexually liberated aims such as birth control and abortion were not among main feminist goals during the nineteenth century. (Banks, *Faces of Feminism*, p. 185.)

⁹⁰⁹ J. A. and Olive Banks, *Feminism and Family Planning*, p. 110; and Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexual Attitudes*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1994, pp. 218-219.

⁹¹⁰ Seidman, pp. 49-50.

as love and sex are concerned, is not easy because there are comparatively few available sources. This limited availability of primary material has meant that, although some inroads have certainly been made, there is still room for considerable work to be done on women's interior sexual lives – on increasing understanding of their innermost thoughts on their sexuality.

Pat Jalland, Jeanne Peterson, Patricia Branca and Pat Thane are among those historians who have examined personal records in order to provide insight into Victorian and Edwardian women's thoughts on such interior concerns.⁹¹¹ Each of these scholars reiterates the extent of the difficulties involved in accessing information regarding such private issues. Jalland, for example, argues that

Sexual and emotional behaviour within the privacy of the pre-marital and marriage partnership is always difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct. Victorians and Edwardians make it even more difficult for us because their public use of written language has proved a misleading guide to their behaviour.⁹¹²

Thane agrees, stressing the point that continuing trust in the image of the passionless Victorian woman 'may well be instances of historians mistaking minority prescriptive literature for authentic experience'.⁹¹³ However, where these

⁹¹¹ Pat Jalland analyses the lives of a select group of upper- and upper-middle-class women from fifty prominent political families during the period 1860-1914. (Pat Jalland, *Women, Marriage and Politics 1860-1914*, Oxford University Press, New York and Melbourne, 1988.) Jeanne Peterson uses personal records to do the same for the women of the upper-middle-class Paget family during the Victorian years. (See Peterson, *Family, Love and Work in the Lives of Victorian Gentlewomen*.) See also Patricia Branca, *Silent Sisterhood. Middle Class Women in the Victorian Home*, Croom Helm, London, 1975; and Pat Thane, 'Late Victorian Women', in T. R. Gourvish and Alan O'Day (eds.), *Later Victorian Britain, 1867-1900*, Macmillan, Houndsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London, 1988, pp. 175-208.

⁹¹² Jalland, *Women, Marriage and Politics*, p. 130.

⁹¹³ Thane, p. 184. Sweet has a similar concern that a 'whole canon of morally prescriptive writing' has been assumed by some to be reflective of 'the real lives and attitudes of Victorian people'. (Sweet, pp. xx-xxi.) Indeed, the actual existence of Victorian marriage and sex manuals 'in themselves belie the image of a thoroughly repressed and inhibited society'. (Himmelfarb, *The Demoralization of Society*, p. 75.) Two such manuals, written by Dr Elizabeth Blackwell in the 1870s, discuss women's sexual needs and stress that 'female sexuality was as strong as that of males'. (Perkin, p. 64.) Another book by Dr Solomon entitled *Guide to Health, or Advice to Both Sexes*, which first appeared in 1782, was reprinted well into the 1870s. Almost every edition ran to thirty thousand copies or more. Dr Solomon believed that it was natural to enjoy one's sex-life and

studies diverge somewhat is in their appraisals of the amount of material that is available that adds to a historical understanding of female sexual feelings and conduct. Thane and Branca both contend that there is scant evidence existing to have ever argued in favour of the accuracy of the stereotype of the asexual middle-class woman. However, whereas Thane argues that there is equally slender evidence supporting the existence ‘of contented and sharing partnerships, of female desires recognisable to the modern observer and [of] sexual fulfilment for women’, Branca claims that there is a considerable quantity of evidence in support of passionate nineteenth century women, dating at least from as far back as the 1820s.⁹¹⁴ What these historians agree on, however, is that the diaries and letters of the particular women their respective research focuses on reveal a diversity of sexual thought and behaviour as well as a general acceptance of varying degrees of pre-marital sexual liberty, within the confines of official engagements.

Pat Jalland’s study points out that individuals responded to the rules laid out in Victorian and Edwardian prescriptive literature in a variety of ways.⁹¹⁵ She shows, for example, that Mary Gladstone’s disapproval of wildly flirtatious female conduct contrasted with many instances of exactly that kind of flirtatious behaviour on the part of the daughters of the prominent Tennant family.⁹¹⁶

As for engaged couples, Michael Mason further argues that private displays of love and sexual intimacy were expected across all social classes. He points out that couples from the upper ranks of society could certainly break away from their

only warned against overindulgence for health reasons. (Himmelfarb, *The Demoralization of Society*, p. 75.)

⁹¹⁴ Thane, p. 184; and Branca, *Silent Sisterhood*, pp. 125-126. In addition, Joan Perkin argues that, in the absence of accounts of contented marriages, incidences of adultery can also be used to demonstrate female sexual desire. Many well-documented nineteenth-century cases of adultery by upper-class married women ‘suggest there were plenty of women with hearty sexual appetites’. (See Perkin, p. 64.) Himmelfarb supports this claiming that the many accounts of happy marriages implies that sexual relations were satisfactory. (Himmelfarb, *The Demoralization of Society*, p. 76.)

⁹¹⁵ Jalland, *Women, Marriage and Politics*, p. 94.

⁹¹⁶ For much more detail on the varying thoughts and behaviour of the women in this study, see chapter 4 ‘Experiences of Love, Courtship and Early Marriage’, in Jalland, *Women, Marriage and Politics*, pp. 94-132.

social group and have moments of exclusive intimacy before formal betrothals – moments that may or may not have led to proposals of marriage. At this level of society, engaged couples were permitted rather free and close relations. As for the middle classes, he also contends, that by the end of the nineteenth century, parental supervision of young courting couples had almost ceased. Mason finds it difficult to distinguish between the courting manners of those hailing from the lower-middle class and the skilled working classes, but he does say that, of those young people situated in and around this vague boundary in the later decades of the nineteenth century, some signs of physical intimacy were permitted in public, such as kissing, cuddling and holding hands.⁹¹⁷

Jeanne Peterson's observations of the romantic and sexual relations of the Paget women support Mason's account of upper-middle-class behaviour. Both Peterson and Joan Perkin provide the diary of Charles Kingsley's fiancée, Frances Grenfell, to not only illustrate the extent of physical intimacy between one engaged couple, but also to demonstrate the existence of the 'intense sexual longings' of at least one middle-class girl.⁹¹⁸ Peterson maintains that flirtation and 'more serious sexual interaction were an acknowledged part of the by-play between two engaged people'; while also acknowledging that 'extensive physical intimacy' being a comfortable and acceptable part of a Victorian engagement would certainly help to explain why broken engagements were so shocking.⁹¹⁹

There is absolutely no doubting the historical value of diaries and letters. Yet, being personal records, the typicality of the sentiments they contain is often subject to questioning. Moreover, studies such as those by Jalland and Peterson concentrate on 'documents' left by women from the upper rungs of the middle classes – there being few such documents left by women from lower down the

⁹¹⁷ Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, p. 118, and p. 123. Patricia Anderson also says that, although there were variations according to social class, 'the general expectation was that the engagement was the time for a couple to enjoy increasing physical intimacy, but to stop short of premarital sexual intercourse'. (Anderson, p. 84.)

⁹¹⁸ Peterson, p. 76; and Perkin, p. 58.

social spectrum. However, for the purpose of this thesis – that of amplifying what has already been written about what the bulk of ‘ordinary’ middle-class women thought about personal issues, including sexuality – popular novels prove particularly suitable. Whereas Bennett’s writing tends to focus on the thoughts and feelings of women on the lower margins of the middle classes, thereby helping historians to flesh out existing analyses of the interior lives of middle-class women, Corelli’s more didactic fiction sheds light on more general, more idealistic turn-of-the-century concepts of womanhood.

Furthermore, the popular status of Bennett’s and Corelli’s literature recommends the extent to which the observations they make about female sexual feelings and the sexual values they espouse are representative of those of the wide, though largely middle- and upper-working-class reading public. Bennett’s fictional narratives, in particular, are extremely valuable in that they support the assertions made by historians like Jalland and Peterson that attitudes towards female sexuality were not as repressive as many have previously claimed. They further bolster the argument that it tended to be much easier for women and men to express their love and their sexual desire for each other in deeds rather than in words – such feelings, Jalland claims, being ‘expressed innumerable times by Victorian and Edwardian wives, within the world of domestic privacy’.⁹²⁰ But perhaps, equally importantly, the texts of Bennett’s popular novels further demonstrate, in a very practical fashion, that it was certainly very possible for widespread discussions of female sexuality to take place – even within this era’s climate of relative reticence.



Arnold Bennett’s novels frequently assume that young middle-class women are aware of their sexuality and that they often desire to display this sexuality – that

⁹¹⁹ Peterson, p. 74 and p. 76. See also Ginger S. Frost, *Promises Broken. Courtship, Class and Gender in Victorian England*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 1995.

they often wish to be considered sexually alluring or, at the very least, physically and femininely attractive by members of the opposite sex. More often than not, this desire manifests itself in the obvious form of flirtatious behaviour or less directly in interest in personal appearance and insecurity or jealousy often motivated by estimation of a peer's attractiveness. Bennett is in no way morally opposed to female sexual expression, but neither is he immune to plotting the sometimes negative consequences deriving from displays of sexual interest – that is, those uninformed by worldly knowledge or experience.

So, in the first place, there are numerous examples of a feminine interest in clothing and appearance – interest that ranges from stylishly or tasteful everyday dress, such as that of Janet Orgreave (*Clayhanger*) and Beatrice Sutton (*Anna of the Five Towns*), to a much more comical, much more extravagant interest in fashion, like that of Helen Rathbone (*Helen with the High Hand*) and Ruth Earp (*The Card*).⁹²¹

With the example of Sophia Baines (*The Old Wives' Tale*), Bennett is more explicit. Sophia's youth and beauty capture the attention of the worldly travelling salesman, Gerald Scales. Moreover, she is an active participant in all of this. As Bennett remarks - 'She did not know what she was doing; she was nothing but the exquisite expression of a deep instinct to attract and charm.'⁹²² The difference between Sophia and Gerald, however, is knowledge and experience. So, whereas he, 'by force of habit, kept his head', she lost hers. On the strength of their sexual attraction to each other, they elope. And it is not until almost immediately after their elopement that Sophia awakens to the 'enormous folly' of her decision – a folly from which there is no possible return for her.⁹²³

⁹²⁰ Jalland, *Women, Marriage and Politics*, p. 130.

⁹²¹ For example, Arnold Bennett, *Clayhanger*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1975 [1910], p. 186; Arnold Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, Wordsworth Classics, Hertfordshire, 1994 [1902], p. 4; Arnold Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, Alan Sutton, Gloucester, 1983 [1910], p. 4; and Arnold Bennett, *The Card. A Story of Adventure in the Five Towns*, Methuen, London, 1964 [1911], p. 99 – where Denry Machin admits that in loving Ruth, he had loved something too expensive.

⁹²² Arnold Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, Edinburgh, n.d. [1908], p. 75.

Furthermore, Bennett's novels strongly suggest that even those women who do not place feminine appearance or sexual desire anywhere near the top of their list of priorities, as Sophia does, rarely escape at least momentary anxiety concerning self-image and sexuality. For example, Anna Tellwright (*Anna of the Five Towns*) is aware that Henry Mynors is attracted to her, but this does not prevent her from experiencing feelings, which surprise her, of discomfort and a mild sense of jealousy when she witnesses the easy and familiar manner of the well-dressed Beatrice Sutton in Mynors' presence.⁹²⁴ Anna does not place sexual attractiveness or sexual desire above all else and so she is not completely insecure in Beatrice's presence. She feels confident, for example, that she is spiritually superior to her well-dressed peer.⁹²⁵ And she marries Mynors, not because of any feelings of sexual attraction towards him, but ultimately because she admires him and sees in him an acceptable means of escaping her father's miserable household. However, as with most of Bennett's characters, she is not immune to the flattery derived from knowing that she is considered to be attractive – that Mynors desires her for both her body and her mind.⁹²⁶

Hilda Lessways is another such case. Hilda is Bennett's 'new woman' character and as such she strives to shake off conventional expectations – including that of regard for, sometimes even obsession with feminine appearance. Readers are privy, however, to numerous instances in which this resolve collapses. Chief among these is when she resumes her acquaintance with her former school-friend, the pretty, well-dressed, conventionally feminine, Janet Orgreave. Bennett asserts that Hilda – 'immature, graceless, harsh, inelegant, dowdy', as she carries on in

⁹²³ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 297. Gerald Scales experiences the tragic consequences of his actions too. His initial attraction to Sophia's virginal beauty and to her impressionable youthful mind, as we have seen, leads to a failed marriage. Furthermore, in contrast to the entrepreneurial Sophia, Scales dies alone and destitute, the tragedy of his own life complete. But the effects of disastrous sexual attraction are not of prime interest to Bennett. Sophia's life story, the journey of a young passionate girl from innocent flirtation to a failed marriage to ultimate loneliness, is what Bennett presents to his readers.

⁹²⁴ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, pp. 11-12.

⁹²⁵ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 11.

⁹²⁶ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 7.

her position as office clerk – does not want to be ‘a destined queen of the home’ like Janet. Nevertheless, he also makes it obvious that this does not alleviate her from experiencing anxiety regarding her appearance. She still desires to be thought of as femininely attractive – especially when face to face with the impeccably womanly Janet:

If Hilda had been a valkyrie or a saint she might have felt
no envy and no pang. But she was a woman. Self-pity
shot through her tremendous pride...⁹²⁷

With this example, Bennett implies that it is entirely natural for most women, whatever their personality or ambitions, to contemplate their appearance and to invest some degree of importance in it. And this resonates with assertions made in the previous chapter to the effect that a majority of Late Victorian and Edwardian women intended to marry.⁹²⁸ Sexual attractiveness, therefore, as one of a number of common criteria for choosing a romantic partner, was expected to play a significant role in the thoughts and experiences of many young men and women.

Nor, Bennett suggests, does a woman’s appetite for feeling sexually attractive necessarily diminish with age. Again, Sophia Baines provides an effective example. As a young woman, she experiences the desire to feel sexually alluring.⁹²⁹ At sixty years old, successful, mature and shrewd as she is, she is still subject to such yearnings:

Could she excite lust now? Ah! The irony of such a
question! To be young and seductive, to be able to kindle

⁹²⁷ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 66.

⁹²⁸ This is not to argue that Bennett’s books suggest that it is only women who find themselves subject to feelings of insecurity or jealousy regarding physical appearance and sexual allure. Men like Edwin Clayhanger (*Clayhanger*) and Samuel Povey (*The Old Wives’ Tale*) experience similar feelings. (See, for example, Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 507 and Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, pp. 112-114.) But, in contrast to women, it is hardly disputed that Late Victorian and Edwardian men felt sexual desire and that they frequently displayed signs of this – even if such exhibitions were regarded as indiscretions by some of the more conservative members of society. (Mrs Baines, for example, looks unfavourably on Samuel Povey’s passionate behaviour concerning her daughter, and his future wife, Constance. Again see, Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, pp. 112-114.)

⁹²⁹ Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, p. 75.

a man's eye – that seemed to her the sole thing desirable.

Once she had been so!⁹³⁰

Like many of Bennett's female protagonists, most of whom are deemed sensible, Sophia wants to be esteemed for her personal traits – for her character and her mind. But – even as an older woman – this in no way precludes her from also wanting to be admired for physical appearance and feminine style.

Of course, a much more obvious way of demonstrating the existence of sexuality in the lives of young middle-class women is through direct expressions of sexual longing. And here Bennett does not disappoint. His fiction presents an array of inner feelings, while still remaining within the boundaries of what was deemed to be socially acceptable. In the first place, his novels demonstrate that a degree of sexual intimacy was certainly expected within the respectable confines of an engagement. And secondly, being true to the diversity of lived experience, they argue that not all women embrace their sexuality in the same way or with the same degree of enthusiasm. How a woman reacts to sexual intimacy relies on her personal temperament, as well as on the extent and nature of her feelings for her chosen partner.

Bennett's male and female characters expect that once a relationship has been established a certain level of intimacy will naturally follow. Helen Rathbone and Andrew Dean (*Helen with the High Hand*) kiss effusively after Andrew's proposal of marriage:

Without asking her permission, without uttering a word of warning, he rushed at her and seized her in his arms. He crushed her with the whole of his very considerable strength. And he added insult to injury by kissing her about forty-seven times. Women are such strange, incalculable creatures. Helen did not protest. She did not invoke the protection of Heaven. She existed, passively

⁹³⁰ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 570.

and silently, the unremonstrating victim of his disgraceful violence.⁹³¹

The obvious use of humour here, contrary to hinting at any sense of sexual prudery, only reinforces the notion that women were of course expected to welcome their lover's embraces.

And there are many other, more seriously expressed, examples of female desire. In a more straightforward manner, Richard Larch's proposal of marriage to Laura Roberts (*A Man From the North*) is rewarded with a warm kiss from her – a kiss whose loving intensity indubitably satisfies Richard to the point that he sighs – 'Ah, she could love!'⁹³² Moreover, Sophia Baines clearly shows that physical intimacy is an accepted aspect of engagement following her elopement with Gerald Scales. Descriptions of their physical intimacy (described in greater detail further in the chapter) brim over with a sense of sexual closeness and of sexual awareness. The ardour of Sophia's kisses promise Scales delights yet to come – but only after their marriage. There is no sense of shame in Sophia's mind that this physical display is not proper. Within the acceptable confines of engagement, passion is assuredly permitted. More than this, it is surely welcome. Again, this is highlighted by the fact that it was only when she first became aware that he had not arranged all the details of their wedding that she forbade him to continue touching her.⁹³³

The extent to which Bennett expresses a female character's sexual feelings mirrors the extent to which they themselves experience and articulate their own feelings of desire. The degree of ardour with which Sophia reacts to sexual intimacy, for example, reflects her passionate temperament. It then follows that his treatment of the sexual feelings of less passionate, less sexually expressive women, like Constance Baines (*The Old Wives' Tale*) and Anna Tellwright (*Anna of the Five Towns*), emulates a level of reticence that matched their individual temperaments

⁹³¹ Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand*, p. 177.

⁹³² Bennett, *A Man From the North*, Hamish Hamilton Library, London, 1973 [1898], p. 177.

and feelings. And, to reiterate a point made earlier, whatever their extent or level of intensity, there is never a sense that Bennett's more serious descriptions of physical intimacy are in any way unrealistic.

There is no doubting the potency of Sophia's sexual longings – longings that lead her to an elopement with Gerald Scales which eventually ends with him abandoning her. There is never a hint that her sexual desires are immoral, even though the circumstances surrounding them render them potentially damaging. What Bennett's narrative reveals, instead, is a level of physical intimacy, of sexual closeness, that strongly belies the notion that turn-of-the-century society overwhelmingly subscribed to a doctrine of prudery. To Scales, and to Bennett's readers, Sophia is a very active participant in her seduction. When they eventually reach London, Scales is confronted with a very willing display of her sexuality:

the powerful clinging of her lips somewhat startled his senses, and also delighted him by its silent promise. He could smell the stuff of her veil, the sarsenet of her bodice, and, as it were wrapped in these odours as her body was wrapped in its clothes, the faint fleshy perfume of her body itself. Her face, viewed so close that he could see the almost imperceptible down on those fruit-like cheeks, was astonishingly beautiful; the dark eyes were exquisitely misted; and he could feel the secret loyalty of her soul ascending to him. She was very slightly taller than her lover; but somehow she hung from him, her body curved backwards, and her bosom pressed against his, so that instead of looking up at her gaze he looked down at it.⁹³⁴

Bennett presents further evidence of female sexual longings later in the novel when he establishes the admittedly unlikely situation in which the abandoned, but still legally married, Sophia is tempted to become another man's mistress. The

⁹³³ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 295.

⁹³⁴ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 291.

circumstances are slightly contrived, but the feelings that she experiences are not. Sophia resists sexual temptation, but not before basking in its warm, voluptuous sweetness.⁹³⁵ And further still in the tale, a much older Sophia admits to herself that her sole desire in life is to be ‘young and seductive’ – to excite a man’s lust once more.⁹³⁶ Passion assumes an important role throughout this middle-class woman’s tumultuous life, and without any hint of authorial scorn or criticism.

Hilda Lessways’ sexual longings equal, if not surpass, Sophia’s in their intensity. With similar directness and candour, Bennett describes the extent of her sexual fervour when kissing the man to whom she has just become engaged:

She was now on the river, whirling. But at the same time she was in the small, hot room, and both George Cannon’s hands were on her unresisting shoulders; and then they were round her, and she felt his physical nearness, the texture of his coat and of his skin; she could see in a mist the separate hairs of his tremendous moustache and the colours swimming in his eyes; her nostrils expanded in transient alarm to a faint, exciting masculine odour. She was disconcerted, if not panic-struck, by the violence of his first kiss; but her consternation was delectable to her.⁹³⁷

Bennett certainly does not shy away from detailing the physical closeness of George and Hilda’s relationship. And he does not stop simply with kissing and embracing. He makes it clear that Hilda anticipates sexual intercourse with the same level of longing, pointing out that she ‘yearned forward to a happiness far more excruciating’:

⁹³⁵ When the sentimentally weak Frenchman, Chirac, professes love to the still married though abandoned Sophia, when he offers her the opportunity of becoming his mistress, Bennett says that this whole feverish situation was ‘infinitely sweet to her, voluptuously sweet, this basking in the heat of temptation. It certainly did seem to her, then, the one real pleasure in the world.’ And he adds: ‘Morally she was his mistress in that moment’. (Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, pp. 421-422.)

⁹³⁶ Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, p. 570.

⁹³⁷ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, pp. 233-234.

She was perfectly aware that her bliss would be torment until George Cannon had married her, until she had wholly surrendered to him.⁹³⁸

There is nothing to indicate that Bennett is in any way uneasy portraying the strength of Hilda's sexual longings. But, despite her candidness and the intimacy of her confession, Hilda experiences a sense of discomfort – albeit, a discomfort that contributes to her excitement. She feels that her desires are 'wrong', 'base' and 'shameful'. But, rather than dampening her sexual enthusiasm, this reaction serves to heighten it. Sexual desire has for Hilda the added allure of the forbidden – especially if she suspects, and there are hints that she does, that these sexual feelings for George Cannon are unaccompanied by the finer or more spiritual aspects of romantic love. Bennett's treatment of Hilda helps to demonstrate that although there is sometimes a degree of discomfort inherent in admitting to female sexual desire, most especially if these feelings are sexual without the redeeming colouring of love, there is still no mistaking its existence and indeed its potency.

Even when Bennett is describing the sentiments of a less passionate or at least less expressive woman like Sophia's sister, Constance Baines (*The Old Wives' Tale*), there is no doubting the acceptability of genuine sexual feeling. In fitting with Constance's obedience to social conventions, it is really only with marriage that readers are offered an insight into the extent of her intimate feelings. Bennett reveals that her 'passion' for him 'burns' stronger than ever when his boyish naivety betrays itself to her – and 'an indescribable something that occasionally, when his face was close to hers, made her dizzy'.⁹³⁹ The extent of Constance's passion is handled with a firm degree of reticence – in a manner suited to her more conventional personality. Nevertheless, her sexual feelings are no less real, no less genuine than those of her more intense sister.

⁹³⁸ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 235.

⁹³⁹ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 149.

And, finally, in keeping with his regard for fictional realism, Bennett also shows that not all relationships experience a high degree of passion or of physical intimacy. Anna Tellwright's relationship with Henry Mynors is never very passionate. Their engagement, for example, brings her 'no ineffable rapture, no ecstatic bliss'.⁹⁴⁰ Anna does not love Henry, though she admires him. Nor does she feel very sexually attracted to him. She recognises that he is widely considered to be handsome, but this does not inspire her with feelings of passion or desire. Subsequently, Bennett reveals little about their physical closeness after Anna accepts Mynors' proposal of marriage, except to say that he 'merely kissed her once more'.⁹⁴¹ There is little in the novel to indicate whether Anna would have been more likely to have been passionate had she been engaged to the man she truly loves, Willie Price. Neither is there much to indicate that she laments this absence of sexual desire. Nevertheless, it remains the case that her future husband's physical presence does little to awaken any sexual feelings in her. Anna marries for reasons other than sex, and is promised a content, if not a blissfully happy, life. Sex, Bennett's novels suggest, is an important aspect of many women's lives, but not all.

Bennett's novels contain little, if any, direct authorial moralising about the degree to which middle-class women experience sexual desire, but this does not mean that the whole notion of morality is entirely absent. However, in stark contrast to *Marie Corelli*, rather than subjecting sexual issues to a collective sense of morality, Bennett prefers to demonstrate the effects of sexual desire on a more individual understanding of right and wrong – on a sense of personal integrity. Similar to his treatment of romantic sentimentality, his novels plainly argue that passion unaccompanied by an awareness of life's more pragmatic concerns tends to yield negative results. Those young men and women in his fiction who do not make the effort to restrain the effects that passion and desire have on them, like Sophia and

⁹⁴⁰ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 129. Mynors' love for Anna has its ardent moments, Bennett informs readers, but for the most part it is kept in check – controlled, mastered. (Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 128 and p. 104.)

⁹⁴¹ Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 129.

Hilda, often find themselves in unhappy or unsatisfying unions. Those, more often than not characteristically less passionate and slightly older and more worldly, who do determine to conduct themselves with prudence and decorum, although they lack the spontaneity and excitement that accompanies the more adventurous, still tend to marry sensibly and happily. Generally, women like Constance and Anna live fulfilling, if orthodox, lives. The optimum environment in which to conduct a romantic relationship in Bennett's mind, then, appears to be one which accomplishes a sense of balance between passion and control.

In spite of this, Bennett's novels offer few extended insights into balanced or contented relationships. His more penetrative explorations of love and sexual desire concern women who make rash or misguided decisions based largely on the strength of their sexual yearnings. With the stories of Hilda Lessways and Sophia Baines, for instance, Bennett demonstrates the often adverse effects of a combination of romantic or passionate temperaments, a substantial degree of social naivety or inexperience and subsequent unbridled romantic fantasies on decisions made concerning lovers and husbands.

This interest in the effects of a lack of sexual restraint on the lives of young women corresponds with the more dominant concerns of moralists during the later years of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century. As has been argued, public emphasis had shifted during the nineteenth century from the question of whether or not women actually experienced sexual desire to a wider acceptance that they did and a subsequent focus, then, on the need for individual self-control. This was all the more important in an age when contraceptive techniques were still not widely available, and if they were, they were far from reliable, and when death from childbirth was still relatively common. It is therefore no surprise that Bennett came to explore this subject of female sexual restraint, or rather the penalties of a lack of sexual restraint, given the topical nature of this issue and given this popular author's belief in the importance of the seemingly inconsequential lives of 'ordinary' individuals. The fact that women

were especially exposed to the effects of sexual double standards, only enhanced interest in the results of such a lack of self-control on their lives.

However, Bennett's writing does indicate that his audience was aware that general sexual controls were still certainly in place in Late Victorian and Edwardian society. If such codes or rules governing sexual behaviour were not firmly in existence then Bennett, a writer whose works are so grounded in an everyday reality, would not have to go to such lengths to remove familial or social control from the lives of Sophia and Hilda, the two young women whose sexual desires he explores in depth. In Sophia's case, although her mother voices opposition to Gerald Scales, Bennett arranges it that her father, the figurehead of the family, is an invalid, without any real authority. Furthermore, at the time that she elopes with Scales, she is staying with an aunt in a distant town, away from closer familial scrutiny. And similarly, Hilda is fatherless. Moreover, at the time that she makes the misguided decision to marry George Cannon, her widowed mother has died, leaving the still relatively young Hilda without any sort of parental guidance. So this, combined with the fact that most of his other more conventional female characters do not transgress any sexual boundaries or make tragically foolish sexual unions, signifies that, despite a perceived loosening of controls, restraints on female sexual behaviour were still very much in place in turn-of-the-century English society.

Bennett's usual level of reticence and the nature of his sexual plots certainly do little to signify a world in the midst of a radical sexual transformation. But neither do they rule out the existence of a more gradual moral transition. The fact that he can articulate his female characters' sexual feelings in a stronger, though still encoded, manner than, say the widely-read mid-Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope, supports this assertion.⁹⁴² Additionally, topical concerns, such as the

⁹⁴² Similar to Bennett, Trollope's mid-Victorian novels imply the existence of strong and passionate feelings between the sexes. One only has to look at the extent of the feelings of desire between Lady Glencora and Burgo Fitzgerald or Alice Vavasor and her cousin, George Vavasor. (Anthony Trollope, *Can You Forgive Her?*) But, Trollope is slightly less explicit than Bennett in

unmarried mother's social alienation, the spread of venereal diseases, death through childbirth, even simply childbirth itself, ensured the need for sexual control to continue to be recognised, even by Bennett – one of the least morally overt of contemporary commentators.

Bennett may extend authorial sympathy to women who make rash decisions guided principally by desire, but, on the whole, the other characters in his novels do not. Instead, there are numerous instances when they display a marked disdain for a lack of sexual control. What his novels reveal, therefore, is the existence of tension between the weakness of giving in to feelings of passion and the strength embodied in following higher ambitions. Like Corelli, and like the purity campaigners of the era, Bennett's characters place more value on matters related to the mind and spirit than the body. Physical needs and desires cannot be ignored, nor should they be, but they should certainly not be given priority. And, as Edwin Clayhanger, Hilda Lessways and Sophia Baines demonstrate, this is not simply because of more pragmatic concerns, such as sexual dissatisfaction and discontented marriages, but it is also connected with more morally-based concerns such as remaining true to personal goals and values.

Edwin Clayhanger articulates the essence of this philosophy more clearly perhaps than any other Bennett character. Near the end of the novel, *Clayhanger*, he momentarily contemplates pursuing Hilda Lessways – a woman he has loved for years but who he believes is still a married, though deserted woman. His conscience prevents him from following such a course of action, however.

There was only one answer. He could not have acted otherwise than he acted. His was not the temperament of a rebel, nor was he the slave of his desires. He could sympathize with rebels and with slaves, but he could not

his references to sexual desires, which, considering the similarity of their approach to fiction, indicates that codes governing sexual expression had begun to loosen by the beginning of the twentieth century. Again, for further detail on this subject, see chapter 2 'Romantic Love' in

join them; he regarded himself as spiritually their superior.⁹⁴³

He is no longer a young man confused by ‘the processes of love...at work within him’.⁹⁴⁴ Instead, he is a mature, more prudent man. His romanticism has eroded with age, if not with experience, for Edwin has had little experience of romantic relationships. Defying conventions for the sake of passion no longer appeals. Bennett largely endorses this attitude by giving Edwin little, if any, reason to regret his decision.

Hilda’s decision-making, as has been said, is not as balanced. She is aware of the extent of her feelings for George Cannon when she agrees to marry him. She knows that her choice has largely been directed by a sense of admiration for his worldliness and by sexual desire:

She knew that she would yield to him. She desired to yield to him. Her mind was full of sensuous images based on the abdication of her will in favour of his.⁹⁴⁵

However, even before Hilda discovers that her marriage is a sham because of Cannon’s bigamy and before she finds out that she is to become an unmarried mother, she experiences surges of disappointment. Marriage renders Hilda unassailably ‘respectable’ in the eyes of the world. But, knowing that she has ‘dishonoured an ideal’, knowing that she has married Cannon out of mistaken desire, makes her feel a sense of personal shame. And, amid ‘the fevers of bodily appetite’ that accompany her marriage, disappointment with her husband sets in.⁹⁴⁶ Profound knowledge of him means that he is no longer the baffling and romantic man that she once thought he was. Growing awareness of her own power over him – power she holds because he needs, desires and loves her more than she does him – disappoints her. She does not love him, though her fondness for him grows.

Sharon Crozier, Trollope: Grist for the Historian’s Mill, Honours History thesis, Flinders University, Adelaide, 1995.

⁹⁴³ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, p. 487.

⁹⁴⁴ Bennett, *Clayhanger*, pp. 267-268.

⁹⁴⁵ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 233.

⁹⁴⁶ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 258.

Sexually, she is not as fulfilled as he – ‘his domination of her senses was nearly at an end’.

She had passed through painful, shattering ecstasies of bliss, hours unforgettable, hours which she knew could never recur. And she was left sated and unsatisfied. So that by virtue of this not yet quite bitter disillusion, she was coming to regard herself as his superior, as being less naïve than he, as being essentially older than he.⁹⁴⁷

The sense of his superiority, the masterful sexuality, that was expected to accompany his masculinity does not survive Hilda’s experience. His satisfaction and her lack of it gives her a power over Cannon that she does not want. She had given herself to his dominant sexual desire only to be disillusioned. Bennett is not saying here that Hilda does not enjoy her sexual experiences, just that the whole package, the husband and the marriage, are not all that she expected or all that she wanted. True to a pattern formed in some of Bennett’s other popular novels, she does not escape the consequences of her foolish lack of inner restraint.

Similarly, Sophia Baines does not escape the consequences of her decision to place her yearning for romantic and sexual adventure over her regard for reason and commonsense. However, unlike Hilda, Sophia allows herself the luxury of placing some of the blame on the shoulders of youth and inexperience. Despite foolishly abandoning her family and marrying Gerald Scales, who later deserts her, she still retains unshakeable belief in her integrity and in her moral superiority. Therefore, she manages to excuse her own actions while condemning those of a French courtesan, Madame Foucault, whom she regards as dramatically pathetic, even hideous:

In the harsh vanity of her conscious capableness and young strength she thought thus, half forgetting her own follies, and half excusing them on the ground of inexperience.⁹⁴⁸

⁹⁴⁷ Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, p. 254.

⁹⁴⁸ Bennett, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, p. 375.

However, Sophia's scornful derision of Madame Foucault is not based entirely on a moral view of sexuality. As has been argued, Sophia herself is not immune to the pleasures of sexual desire. At one stage, the temptation to become Chirac's mistress seems to her to be the 'one real pleasure in the world' available to her – a thought that, Bennett contends, makes her his mistress, if not in a real then at least in a moral sense.⁹⁴⁹ Nor is she immune to the advantages to be gained from sexual experience. After all, after marrying Scales, sexual experience does afford her the knowledge and the confidence to view herself as 'a woman of the world'.⁹⁵⁰ Rather, Sophia's disdain is also for the high degree of inefficiency and sentimentality that marks Madame Foucault's managing of her own business affairs. For Sophia claims that if she could not have made a more competent, more successful courtesan than this ageing, blubbing mess, then she would have drowned herself.⁹⁵¹

Sexual immorality is largely absent from Bennett's novels. Yet, when it does appear, if not completely condemned, then neither is it endorsed. It has to be understood, however, that sexual immorality as Bennett conceives it is not that which matches a general or conventional understanding of the term – pre-marital or extra-marital sex, for instance. Rather, it incorporates a more individual notion – one that tests personal integrity. As Hilda's experiences show, society may view a woman's sexual state as respectable, but this does not necessarily mean that she regards herself in the same way. Furthermore, these popular novels support the argument that the turn-of-the-century reading public were witnessing a shift away from the expectation that a collective sense of morality could be relied on to control sexual behaviour, and towards increased emphasis on internal control – on an inner sense of restraint.



⁹⁴⁹ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, pp. 421-422.

⁹⁵⁰ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 306 and p. 374.

Corelli's treatment of female sexuality differs from Bennett's principally by the fact that, whereas he explores the effects of sexual desire on an individual sense of morality, she subjects it to a much more collective understanding of the term. A good deal of what Corelli's novels have to say on the subject of women and physical intimacy, however, overlaps with what has already been written in the previous chapter on 'Romantic Love'. This is largely because, even though her fiction desperately tries to segregate love and sex, the attempt is never entirely successful. Instead, Corelli often uses one in order to define the other. Her novels often portray love and sex as mirror images of each other. These notions then become bound together to the point that it is almost impossible to extricate them. What this means, then, is that the following section on Corelli and female sexuality has little need to be as extensive as the preceding discussion of romantic love, where her attitudes towards sex have had to be consistently drawn on.

So, what do Corelli's bestselling novels reveal about turn-of-the-century attitudes towards women and their sexual feelings and experiences? In the first place, and contrary to the idea of Victorian prudery, her fiction does not deny that female sexual desire is a legitimate sensation. Indeed, far from simply attacking the existence of female sexuality, there are times when the highly didactic Corelli is almost playful about it. In *The Mighty Atom*, for example, she embodies all the flirtatious sexuality of the adult mating-game in a children's game of hide and seek.⁹⁵² And in *The Master-Christian* she describes one of her innocent heroines, Sylvie Hermenstein, as 'a dainty, exquisitely dressed piece of femininity with the figure of a sylph' – 'an Austro-Hungarian of the prettiest and most bewitching type' – a wealthy woman who might have married numerous times but who 'took a perverse pleasure in "drawing on" her admirers till they were just on the giddy brink of matrimony, - then darting off altogether, she left them bewildered, confused, and not a little angry.'⁹⁵³

⁹⁵¹ Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 375.

⁹⁵² Marie Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, Methuen, London, 1912 [1896], see, for example, p. 46 and p. 75.

⁹⁵³ Marie Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, Methuen, London, 1900, p. 159.

However, with repeated utterance of her belief that ‘modern’ society increasingly views the romantic relationship as a ‘coarse bodily union and no more’, Corelli continually attempts to look beyond the mere physical.⁹⁵⁴ Instead, her novels claim to offer relief from society’s growing tendency to value the material over the spiritual, to emphasise the sexual over the loving. She openly declares that ‘sensuality is vulgarity’ and frequently uses depictions of ‘fallen’ women to demonstrate the truth of this statement.⁹⁵⁵

On the whole, Corelli’s fiction supports the existence of a sexual double standard. Women are certainly subject to higher moral standards than men where sexuality is concerned. However, her writing also advocates that men should increase their practice of sexual restraint. In this way, her books are closely in tune with the mindset of moderate feminists and ‘Purity’ campaigners of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century – those who challenged male sexual liberty, but who did not advocate a loosening of sexual mores as they concerned women.⁹⁵⁶ And Corelli’s contention that base sensualism should be completely overshadowed by respect for the spirit and the intellect echoes that of much of the era’s ‘progressive’ ideas. As Michael Mason argues, nineteenth-century ‘progressive’ thought was ‘coloured by the wish, and confidence, that sex [would] become less and less important as human society advance[d]’.⁹⁵⁷

However, Corelli did not exactly follow these principles with a single mind. Instead, her novels illustrate that she liked to straddle both worlds – that of the intellect and that of the senses. Corelli’s bestselling fiction indulges in stories of female sensuality. For example, she frequently portrays the corruption and the decadence that surrounds the ‘fallen’ woman only to eventually restore a firm sense of moral balance for her readers. She allows her vast audience to derive

⁹⁵⁴ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 304.

⁹⁵⁵ Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, p. 203.

⁹⁵⁶ For example, see Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexual Attitudes*, pp. 218-219.

⁹⁵⁷ Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexual Attitudes*, p. 222.

enjoyment or shock or both from tales of female sexual deviance, only to alleviate them of any potential feelings of guilt for having done so.

In this way, Corelli's plots have a lot in common with the increasingly popular scandal journalism of the period – writing that either assumes or enforces a shared understanding of morality among the audience.⁹⁵⁸ Like scandals, Corelli's fiction often benefits from the 'forbidden status of sexual subjects, and the public enchantment by them'.⁹⁵⁹ In the case of both, adopting an attitude of self-righteous piety not only justifies 'sensationalistic reporting as a duty' it also 'capitalizes on the shock ostensibly felt by the public'.⁹⁶⁰ Like sex scandals, Corelli's novels trade on emotions – they elicit feelings of pleasure and shame, all the time entralling the audience.⁹⁶¹ They can only be successful in eliciting such feelings if they assume, or aim to enforce, uniformity of values among their vast audiences – whether the readers of the relevant newspapers or of Corelli's bestselling novels. Corelli's heavily didactic style of writing, although it generally assumes that her audience is uniform in its thoughts and in its value systems, tends also to appear to aim at ensuring that this sameness is present and that there is little if any dissent by constant, almost blatant manipulation of her readers' reactions. In this way she performs the traditional dual role of the popular author – that of entertainer and instructor.⁹⁶²

Cohen's point that scandal announces sex in such a way as to reinforce the idea that it is a very private issue also applies to Corelli's fiction.⁹⁶³ By obeying turn-of-the-century rules of reticence, by using an encoded language to communicate tales of sexual transgression, Corelli infers that sex is an almost sanctified act – one that surely belongs in the private realm. However, the flip side of this, of

⁹⁵⁸ Indeed, Cohen argues that 'while it ought to be obvious, it has not been remarked that scandal, often sex scandal, structures the usual plot of the realist novel in the Victorian period.' (Cohen, pp. 16-17.)

⁹⁵⁹ Cohen, p. 10.

⁹⁶⁰ Cohen, p. 11.

⁹⁶¹ Cohen, p. 20.

⁹⁶² This idea is also attributed to scandal writers, see Cohen, p. 19.

⁹⁶³ Cohen, p. 4.

course, is the Foucauldian argument that employing an encoded language not only facilitates discussion of this nature, but serves to place it at the heart of everyday discourse. Like other novels, newspaper articles and even medical debates of the period, Corelli's idealistic novels continually refer to the private status of sex, while simultaneously promoting it as a topic of public discussion. Her depictions of both the sanctity and the sensational aspects of sexuality reflect the degree of compromise, even tension, existing between public interest in the issue of sexuality as well as widespread respect for reticence.

Corelli's overall approach to the topic of sex, then, helps to confirm that female sexuality was generally accepted in Late Victorian and Edwardian society – as long as it was displayed within the conventionally respectable confines of marriage. Indeed, her novels take this point even further. Given the many imperfections inherent within the modern institution of marriage, Corelli argues that female sexual desire is only sanctified, and therefore legitimised or endorsed, by love of a highly spiritual nature – a kind of love that is all too often absent from common marriages.⁹⁶⁴ This recalls the comment made by Bennett's Hilda Lessways, referred to earlier in the chapter, that argued that her own conscience concerning the respectability of her decision to marry George Cannon and to therefore engage in sexual relations with him did not chime with the collective conscience of her society which viewed their relationship as utterly respectable. Still, Corelli's remarkably popular fiction strongly suggests that, despite belief in the existence of a general loosening of sexual regulations, the sexual double standard was firmly in place at the turn of the twentieth century. Women were expected to be more morally responsible than men, even if there was increasing pressure on men to exercise a higher degree of sexual control.

So, how does Corelli show all of this? She does so principally with the image of the 'fallen' woman – a model of womanhood that she uses to sharpen or clarify her definition of the feminine ideal. This technique of using the 'bad' to define the

⁹⁶⁴ For a discussion of the state of modern marriages as Corelli sees it, see chapter 7 'Romantic Love'.

‘good’ is not unique on the part of Corelli. As Jeffrey Weeks argues, such a binary opposition formed the basis of much Victorian gender idealism. In reference to the pervasive ‘angel in the house’ ideal, for example, he claims that ‘the pedestals mother and wife depended for her purity on the degradation of the fallen woman’ – recalling the much discussed contradictions and paradoxes associated with notions of ‘respectability’ and the simultaneous use of prostitution – whether real or apparent.⁹⁶⁵ Paradoxes aside, this is a method that Corelli continually employs – illustrating its continuing popularity past the Victorian era and into the early decades of the twentieth century.

Corelli’s exploration of sexual deviants, in the face of her promotion of the feminine ideal, however, requires her to account for the deviant’s existence – in order to once again convince of the value of her ideal. So, her solution is to ‘unsex’ fallen women – to remove them from womanhood so that she does not have to – in effect – assume responsibility for them. The pattern that her ‘fallen’ women plots usually follow, then, is: firstly, to assure the readers that women are inherently sexually innocent; secondly, that if corrupted, the root of their badness lies with ‘modern’ society; thirdly, sensational exploration of this sexual ‘badness’ and the inevitable penalty; and finally, their ‘unsexing’ so that Corelli can sell her idealisation of womanhood. Only rarely do sexually deviant women escape complete unsexing. And on even rarer occasions do they avoid the hellish fate that is prescribed for all women who transgress the boundaries of sexual morality. Love is the key. Only women who believe in true love, are desperate to secure it, or who confuse sex with love have any chance of avoiding social and spiritual punishment. Or, as is the case with the Biblical Mary Magdalen, portrayed in Corelli’s novel, *Barabbas*, only women who gain an abundance of love inspired by religious faith and who can go on to use this love to ‘save’ or enhance the lives of

⁹⁶⁵ Weeks, p. 19.

others, which is, after all, the supreme womanly duty, are forgiven for their previous immorality.⁹⁶⁶

The Master-Christian's Sylvie Hermenstein effectively demonstrates Corelli's stance on women, love and sex. Sylvie never loses her right to womanhood even though she almost gives in to the temptation to abandon her respectable life and join the decadent Marquis Fontenelle's 'harem'. Her ultimate decision not to do so saves her. But, more than this, her belief that she loves him and that he loves her, if only 'for the moment', and her faith in the idea that women do not 'count the cost of loving', that they simply love, does even more to secure her femininity.⁹⁶⁷ She is a complete woman because her temptation to 'fall' was due only to her appropriately feminine weakness for love.⁹⁶⁸

Mrs Valliscourt (*The Mighty Atom*) and Judith Iscariot (*Barabbas*) similarly crave love. Moreover, unlike Sylvie, these two women cross a very distinct moral boundary. Because of this they are punished. Mrs Valliscourt, although a married woman, is effective here as an example of Corelli's views on the issue. She leaves her cruel and atheistic husband and her defenceless son in order to live in sin for one year with another of Corelli's decadent aristocrats – the aristocracy being a favourite target for accusations of immorality during the era. Corelli treats Mrs Valliscourt with a degree of sympathy because she claims that her desperate actions are due to the fact that her unloving husband has robbed her of her faith in love. He has 'killed every womanly sentiment' in her – separating her from her child and robbing her of 'God, of hope, of every sense of duty'.⁹⁶⁹ Her decision to

⁹⁶⁶ Of course, it has to be noted that it would have been extremely difficult for Corelli to have ignored the Bible's treatment of Mary Magdalen. Corelli could invent characters who were not in the Bible, such as Judas Iscariot's sister, Judith, and insert them into her text. But, given turn-of-the-century England's widespread regard for Christianity, she could not very well contradict a notable Biblical story in order to reinforce her views on female sexual immorality. Still, the fact that she chose to acknowledge Mary Magdalen's redemption is significant in her treatment of the 'fallen' woman.

⁹⁶⁷ Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, p. 161.

⁹⁶⁸ See chapter 7 'Romantic Love' for more on this issue.

⁹⁶⁹ Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, p. 137. Mrs. Valliscourt tells her son before leaving that she used to have a heart – that she used to be 'full of romance, nonsense, and sentiment, and faith'. But living

flee Mr Valliscourt is delivered to the audience as an understandable desire. But, abandoning her son and therefore her motherly duty certainly is not. Mrs Valliscourt may have been forgiven for disowning her position as a wife – the ‘modern’ institution of marriage is, after all, plagued by imperfections – but replacing love with sex and supplanting the role of mother with that of mistress ensures her damnation.

The significant difference between this story and that of Judith Iscariot is that by the end of *Barabbas*, Corelli admits that she does not know to which destination this ‘fallen’ woman’s soul is bound – Heaven or Hell.⁹⁷⁰ Judith has a long-running affair with a married man, the High Priest, Caiaphas; was responsible for Barabbas being sent to prison, a man who was completely in love with her and who killed another man who slurred her ‘good’ name; and, most shocking of all, she persuaded her brother, Judas, to betray Christ, in turn leading to his crucifixion – for which she received Caiaphas’s praise and jewels. However, Corelli points out that she did all of this under the guidance, or misguidance, of the powerful High Priest – a man who had his own political reasons for wanting this result. She was also motivated by her ardent desire to return her beloved brother to his original religion and so back to the family fold. And, most importantly of all in Corelli’s books, she did what she did because she was in love with Caiaphas. The fact then remains that Judith’s ‘fall’ was due to the fact that she was misguided by feelings of love and desire.⁹⁷¹

Furthermore, by the novel’s end, just before she takes her own life in an atmosphere infused with both insanity and religious ecstasy, Judith reveals that she has become a follower of Christ.⁹⁷² This intoxicating blend of spiritual mysticism and romantic love, works to create doubt as to Judith’s ultimate fate. And, given

with her husband has long since got rid of all that. When she abandons her husband and son, it is to live with Sir Lascelles, as his mistress, in return for ‘a year’s amusement, attention and liberty’. (Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, p. 135 and p. 155.)

⁹⁷⁰ Corelli, *Barabbas*. *A Dream of The World’s Tragedy*, Methuen, London, 1907, p. 454.

⁹⁷¹ Corelli, *Barabbas*, for example, see p. 282, where Judith says that Caiaphas told her to betray Jesus and her brother.

that Judith is engaged in a sexual affair with a married man, the strength of this blend of love and religion during this particular period cannot be over-emphasised.

There are numerous other 'fallen' female characters in Corelli's novels, mostly peripheral characters, who receive sympathy, even grace, because love motivated their actions. In *The Master-Christian*, alone, there are multiple examples. There is the instance of a young woman who becomes pregnant after being seduced by a decadent clergyman, l'abbé Verginaud, and who gives birth to one of the novel's heroes, Cyrillon Verginaud (alias Gys Grandit). In the case of another immoral clergyman, Claude Cazeau tricks a young woman into loving him only to abandon her. Her subsequent insanity, taking of his life and then her suicide earns her the sympathy of those around her. And there are two more examples of young women who, through love of a man, become unmarried mothers – socially ostracised but deserving of sympathy, understanding and even forgiveness.⁹⁷³ Along with Mary Magdalen's story, what these tales all have in common is firstly, women from poor or disadvantaged backgrounds; secondly, the involvement of a corrupt Church (a topic that is continually exploited throughout Corelli's novels); and thirdly, a vulnerability to love. Their low social status, doubtless lack of education and worldliness, and more often than not, their humble acceptance of the harsh social and economic consequences of their actions recommend them as victims – as wronged women. In line with Corelli's often condescending treatment of the lower classes, these women are not expected to be held responsible for their sins – not as much as women with a more privileged social status, women who form the bulk of her protagonists.

Corelli's sensational criticism of a corrupt Church and of its role in the creation of a subsequent scorn of unmarried mothers is at odds with what historians, for example, assert concerning increasing involvement of Christian institutions in the

⁹⁷² Corelli, *Barabbas*, pp. 390-399 and pp. 423-431.

⁹⁷³ Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, see for example, pp. 389-392, p. 239 and pp. 268-279.

care and reform of such unfortunate women.⁹⁷⁴ However, what both awareness of charity work with unmarried mothers and Corelli's treatment of these women demonstrates is that, although turn-of-the-century society still considered female sexual deviance to be disgraceful and shameful, it did not consider these women to be undeserving of sympathy or without hope of redemption. Nevertheless, it still remains that the view that Corelli propagated in her bestselling fiction was that sexual morality was very much a class issue and that social background and upbringing segregated the deserving unfortunates from the undeserving sinners.

Lady Sibyl (*The Sorrows of Satan*) is a firm illustration of this. Most scandalous of all classes were undoubtedly the aristocracy. Most shocking of all vehicles for sexual immorality were indubitably beautiful women. And so, most notorious of all Corelli's fallen women is this stunningly beautiful, though base and shameful aristocrat. Lady Sibyl is thoroughly sensual. Unlike ideal women, she has managed to attain sexual knowledge. The sources of her knowledge are the decadent society in which she moves, the poetry of Algernon Charles Swinburne and New Women novels. As she herself explains:

I ask you, do you think a girl can read the books that are now freely published, and that her silly society friends tell her to read, – “because it is so dreadfully *queer!*” – and yet remain unspoilt and innocent? Books that go into the details of the lives of outcasts? – that explain and analyse the secret vices of men? – that advocate almost as sacred duty ‘free love’ and universal polygamy? – that see no shame in introducing into the circles of good wives and pure-minded girls, a heroine who boldly seeks out a man, *any* man, in order that she may have a child by him, without the “degradation” of marrying him? I have read all

⁹⁷⁴ Charity work with unmarried mothers is referred to in chapter 6 ‘Religion and Spirituality’, p. 223. See also Ann R. Higginbotham, ‘Respectable Sinners: Salvation Army Rescue Work with Unmarried Mothers, 1884-1914’, in Gail Malmgreen (ed.), *Religion in the Lives of Englishwomen*,

these books, – and what can you expect of me? Not
innocence, surely!⁹⁷⁵

Lady Sibyl's chief downfall is that she is a 'modern woman' – a woman who can only think and analyse, and so, who cannot believe in the true womanly elements of love and spirituality.⁹⁷⁶ The nature of her society, her upbringing and her reading have served to strip her of all that is idealistic and noble. All that is left is the material and the tangible – of which sexual pleasure is a prime example.

Lady Sibyl has, therefore, a 'coldness and insensibility to love' – 'unnatural' in a woman.⁹⁷⁷ And when, at one point in the novel, she professes a yearning, more than this, an absolute thirst for 'love', to the point that she wants to be 'drowned in it, lost in it, killed by it', it is clear that the 'love' to which she refers is not 'the love of the fairy prince for the fairy princess, – as harmless an idea as the loves of the flowers themselves', but pure, base lust.⁹⁷⁸ Lady Sibyl, her misguided husband, Geoffrey Tempest, comes to realise, is beautiful, but only externally. Inside, she is rotten – plagued by 'the disease of vanity and desire that riots in [her] veins'.⁹⁷⁹ Sensationally, Tempest is not the object of his wife's warped and destructive desire. Rather, Satan is, in the guise of the charming Prince Lucio Rimânez. Corelli's audience are then treated to a magnificent display of sexual degradation, where a beautiful lady extinguishes any notion of pride that she may have ever possessed by offering herself, body and soul, to the object of her desire. In the darkness of night, Lady Sibyl begs Lucio to take her, to 'love' her for only one hour. (Corelli feels that she may refer to sexual desire but not directly name it.) Afterwards she will allow him to do what he will with her – brand her as an outcast if he wishes – such is the intense desperation of her desire for him. Lady Sibyl's suicide note allows readers to sympathise for her, but only to a very limited extent. Her abject baseness sentences her, irrevocably, to eternal damnation. She

1760-1930, Croom Helm, London and Sydney, 1986, pp. 216-233, see for example, p. 217, p. 219, and p. 229.

⁹⁷⁵ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, pp. 201-202.

⁹⁷⁶ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 199.

⁹⁷⁷ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 269.

⁹⁷⁸ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, pp. 269-270.

has committed the ultimate crime against Corelli's idealisation of femininity – in a 'modern' world where there is increasing access to sexual discussions, she has acquired extensive knowledge of a sexual kind from which there is no return to a womanly state of innocence.

The main reasoning for Corelli's continuing faith in the sexual double standard, then, is connected with the whole notion of spiritual redemption. Corelli does support the idea that men should exercise a greater degree of sexual restraint. However, the fact remains that women are still expected to be more morally responsible than their male counterparts. How can women fulfil their duty of saving men if they themselves indulge in sexual immorality? This is why Geoffrey Tempest – a man who visits brothels and other places of ill-repute and who gives undue prominence to his feelings of passionate lust, which is primarily the reason why he marries Lady Sibyl in the first place – can be saved, whereas his wife cannot.⁹⁸⁰ In contrast to women, Corelli explains,

the libertinage of a man, while it may run to excess in hot youth, generally resolves itself, under the influence of a great love, into a strong desire for undefiled sweetness and modesty in the woman beloved. If a man has indulged in both folly and sin, the time comes at last, when, if he has any good left in him at all, he turns back upon himself and lashes his own vices with the scorpion-whip of self-contempt till he smarts with the rage and pain of it, – and then, aching in every pulse with his deserved chastisement, he kneels in spirit at the feet of some pure, true-hearted woman whose white soul, like an angel, hovers compassionately above him, and there lays down his life saying 'Do what you will with it, – it is yours!' And woe to her who plays lightly with such a gift, or works fresh

⁹⁷⁹ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 361

⁹⁸⁰ For Tempest's analysis of his own 'libertinage', see *The Sorrows of Satan*, pp. 303-305.

injury upon it! No man, even if he has in his day, indulged in 'rapid' living, should choose a 'rapid' woman for his wife, – he had far better put a loaded pistol to his head and make an end of it!⁹⁸¹

Tempest, it follows, is saved by a woman. Not his wife, but Mavis Clare – the compassionate, impeccably moral writer of genius who exerts her loving influence over his floundering life. Who then saves 'fallen' women? Apart from fleeting references to the temporary redeeming effect of Mavis Clare's spiritual fiction on Lady Sibyl's mind, it seems that responsibility for her redemption is far removed from the earthly realm – it is in the spiritual sphere, resting ultimately with God. Placing this woman's fate in the hands of religion and spirituality alleviates Corelli from having to find a workable, more realistic solution – a solution that a turn-of-the-century society still subscribing to the double standard – despite continuing to offer charitable help – does not seem to offer either.



Bennett and Corelli provide historians with insights into sexual attitudes that are difficult to find elsewhere. Bennett offers a view into the subtleties and nuances of individual responses to prevailing sexual standards. Corelli differs in that she concentrates on the connection between these standards and ideal concepts of femininity. Yet, when viewed together, their novels corroborate each other on a number of key points.

In the first place, each author confirms that public sexual discussions were certainly permitted during the Late Victorian and Edwardian period, provided that a substantial degree of reticence was ensured. This was achieved with the use of an encoded discourse – with the use of indirect expressions whose meaning would have been nonetheless clear to the audience.

⁹⁸¹ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 303.

Secondly, both Bennett's and Corelli's novels deny the validity of the female stereotype as the passive recipient of male sexual desire. They demonstrate that it was acceptable for middle-class women to express sexual desire and pleasure, as long as this was limited to the acceptable confines of engagements and marriage. However, neither writer actively encourages sexual knowledge among young unmarried middle-class women. Nor do they promote sexually assertive behaviour on their part. Instead, and in keeping with much of the 'progressive' thought of the era, each writer, in very different ways, endorses the need for some degree of sexual control.

Bennett's novels suggest that women are frequently sexually self-aware. More than this, they are often quite pro-active in their sexual relations. Indeed, on a number of occasions, female characters embrace their feelings of sexual desire too enthusiastically – to the point that they abandon their usually high degree of reason. In these instances, the influence of social naivety, sexual inexperience and romantic or unrealistic expectations culminates in misguided decisions regarding romantic relationships – tragic mistakes from which there is little hope of escape, according to the social codes at the time. With these narratives, then, Bennett's fiction indicates that when individual sexual restraint was absent, the situation often yielded negative consequences for the young middle-class women involved.

Corelli's bestsellers, on the other hand, perceive sexual knowledge itself generally to be dangerous for single middle-class women. For the most part, this is because sexual innocence is deemed essential to her ideal of womanhood. True to her brand of literary escapism, Corelli rarely discusses or refers to more practical concerns linked with unmarried women and sexual knowledge and experience, such as unwanted pregnancies. That is to say, she does not discuss controversial issues such as these in her narratives concerning middle-class women. But she does do so when writing about working-class women who are always on the periphery of her plots. So resolved is Corelli's approach to the subject of sexual knowledge and gender idealisation, that sexually loose thoughts or behaviour on

the part of her female protagonists renders them 'unsexed'. As punishment for defying these ideals, these women are robbed of their femininity. Corelli's novels definitely oppose female sexual liberation. Rather, and in line with much of the era's more 'progressive' thought, they do promote the need for increased male sexual restraint – although it has to be said, that the men in her novels are still granted greater sexual licence than their female counterparts.

Bennett's and Corelli's books each acknowledge a slight loosening of social control over sexual expression, if not sexual behaviour. And consequently both writers, again in differing manners, point to the need for a more individually guided notion of sexual restraint in place of moral prescriptions promoted by, for example, parents and other authorities, such as religious leaders.

Conclusion

‘Forward! But Not Too Fast!’

This thesis has revisited the still vexed issue of the uses of fiction to historians. With this in mind, it has set out to explore the historical significance of a number of novels by Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli as they depict the lives of contemporary single middle-class women at the turn of the twentieth century. It is no easy task for historians to access women’s interior lives. Few women from the Late Victorian and Edwardian middle classes, especially from the lower rungs of this group, left written records for historians to analyse. Moreover, many of the concerns that this study has examined, including domesticity, love and sexual desire, are often considered such familiar aspects of the ordinary business of life that recording individual reactions to them has not presented itself as a priority to many.

Popular novels of the period provide one way into this realm of investigation. This thesis has not used novels simply for an illustrative purpose.⁹⁸² Their contributions to historians’ understanding of the past are much more substantial than this limited function suggests. Within this study, novels have been used to confirm what has already been written in a wide range of history writing. More importantly, they have also been used to help fill in some of the gaps that exist in our understanding of popular attitudes at the time. Turn-of-the-century novels, especially popular novels, flesh out existing historical studies by throwing additional light on the interior lives of unmarried middle-class women, on their thoughts and feelings – historical insights that few other available sources offer.

How do these novels do this when emotions, whether in the past or in the present, are so notoriously difficult, if not impossible, to verify? The representativeness of

⁹⁸² This notion of using fiction simply for illustrative purposes is discussed in reference to the views of Peter Laslett in chapter 2 ‘Using Fiction as a Historical Source’, see p. 89. Also see Peter Laslett, ‘The Wrong Way Through the Telescope: A Note on Literary Evidence in Sociology and in Historical Sociology’, *Journal of Sociology*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1976, pp. 319-342, p. 328.

the concerns expressed and the views endorsed in Arnold Bennett's and Marie Corelli's novels is promoted initially by the popularity that these books attained among the contemporary reading public. In order to sell such a consistently large number of novels, the themes explored and opinions articulated must resonate in the minds of a significant proportion of that reading public. The issues raised and views supported must 'strike a nerve'.⁹⁸³

Furthermore, the weight of evidence within a novel, or within a group of novels, supports the representativeness of attitudes expressed or implied. That is to say, 'recurrences' of themes, consistency of expressed opinions, and even repetition of unstated but implicit assumptions, all combine to form patterns that correspond with the values and the concerns of that portion of the reading public that continues to sustain the author's popularity. Evidence within the text, or texts, affirms itself by 'recurrences'.⁹⁸⁴ And again, these affirmations are in turn supported by the popularity of the book or books in question.

This study has argued in line with reader-response theories that the reader and author meet to affirm the values expressed in these popular novels. This implies some individuality of interpretation, but at least, among readers who share the same moral and social background, it is likely that meaning will be similar.⁹⁸⁵

This leads to the question of influence. How far did these popular novels reflect the concerns of the reading public and how far did they actually shape or influence them? There is no satisfactory way of responding to the second part of this question in particular, because there is no way of knowing precisely what is in the minds of any reader or group of readers. However, this thesis has argued the

⁹⁸³ See, for example, Robert Druce, *This Day Our Daily Fictions. An Enquiry into the Multi-Million Bestseller Status of Enid Blyton and Ian Fleming*, Rodopi, Amsterdam-Atlanta, 1992, p. 290. See also Claud Cockburn, *Bestseller. The Books that Everyone Read 1900-1939*, Sidgwick and Jackson, London, 1972, pp. 2-3.

⁹⁸⁴ See Druce's appreciation of Stierle's literary theories, in Druce, p. 295.

⁹⁸⁵ See chapter 1 'A History of Women's Emotions Using the Novels of Bennett and Corelli' which argues that readers did share a similar moral and social environment during this period.

validity of the theory that reading acts to confirm or lend authority to existing preconceptions and prejudices.⁹⁸⁶

It is also likely that moral instruction partly accounted for the popularity of some types of novels. For example, it is highly probable that many more readers turned to Corelli's bestsellers for this kind of guidance than to the more middlebrow books of Bennett. Confessing to viewing authorship as something akin to preaching, Corelli approached writing with the assumption in mind that she was to guide the thoughts of her readers. She certainly directs the reactions of her readers very firmly – her heavily didactic style of writing surely leaving little room for dissent. Yet, how far her constant espousals of traditional values, especially regarding middle-class women, influenced her readers and how far they simply mirrored concerns already in the readers' minds can only be guessed at.

What can be assumed, however, is that, given the ongoing popularity of Bennett and Corelli throughout most of this period, the views and attitudes expressed in their novels did, to some degree, enter into contemporary public debate. To what extent they influenced this debate is impossible to ascertain, but it is certain that their novels and the views that they endorsed were more dynamic than static. As public voices of the period, Bennett and Corelli certainly contributed to discussions of topical issues – especially considering the focus of their writing, as these concerned the place of unmarried middle-class women in turn-of-the-century society.

As for the comparative element of this thesis – it is clear from a reading of each chapter that Bennett and Corelli contributed to a history of women's emotions in different ways (reflected by the design of the thesis which for the most part deals with each author separately). Neither is more valuable to historians. Each simply offers different types of insights – insights, in this instance, that, when viewed

⁹⁸⁶ For more on this theory, see Druce, p. 297 and p. 300.

together, contribute to a deeper understanding of the situation and inner lives of single middle-class women in that society.

Bennett penetrates individual emotions much more deeply than his bestselling counterpart. His middlebrow fiction explores the subtleties of individual reactions. One of his most valuable contributions to a history of emotions is his presentation of an array of personal feelings – of individual responses to prevailing moral standards, as well as to visible social shifts at the time. Bennett's novels provide historians with an opportunity to access interior lives – to penetrate the thoughts and feelings of unmarried middle-class women who rarely recorded these themselves.

Corelli's bestselling novels appeal to a wider and necessarily more diverse audience. Therefore, her books have to address a more general set of values. This is frequently demonstrated by the extent to which she concentrates on exploring the wide topic of gender idealisation. Her novels are much more escapist in tone than Bennett's fictional realism. So, whereas Bennett is limited to depicting only that which will strike the reader as a credible or plausible representation of their emotional, moral and social world or one they recognise, Corelli is much more free to explore the more intangible, therefore less verifiable, dimensions of life – namely, the spiritual and the ideal. Corelli has the liberty, then, to exaggerate the social and moral problems that she claims the nation is facing. She also has the corresponding freedom or licence to offer highly exaggerated solutions to these quandaries – solutions that do not need to be workable and so, can be other-worldly and escapist. These bestsellers cannot be used to reconstruct the very intricate, very private emotions of unmarried middle-class women, but they can aid historians to build up a picture of more general attitudes towards or reactions to social and moral shifts – reactions that include a widespread desire to reaffirm more traditional values and ideals, particularly as these relate to middle-class women.

Despite their many differences, Bennett and Corelli add to a richer understanding of Late Victorian and Edwardian unmarried middle-class women's lives. In the first place, they contribute to existing historical narratives by further denying the validity of persistent myths or stereotypes relating to middle-class women. For example, an analysis of their books refutes the notion that 'ordinary' middle-class women were either 'idle' or leisurely. The extent to which Bennett details the daily lives of middle-class women (especially lower-middle-class ones), and the multitude of mundane chores and duties that occupy their time, leaves clear impression of lives with little room for idleness or leisure. Similarly, and even though she tends to ignore the mundane reality of domesticity by depicting upper-middle-class and aristocratic women, Corelli's numerous references to the demeaning effects of drudgery on the lives of middle-class women supports the accuracy of Bennett's portraits. That is to say, Corelli's prose, much more than the examples of her female characters, lends weight to this argument.

In addition, each of these authors denies the stereotypical image of sexually repressed or at least sexually passive middle-class women. Their novels strongly indicate that expressions of female sexual desire were acceptable, if confined to appropriate avenues, such as engagements and marriages. Bennett's books, in particular, portray unmarried middle-class women who are sexually self-aware. Indeed, and far from the stereotypical image of the sexless woman, both Bennett and Corelli argue that middle-class women can risk placing too much emphasis on sexual desire – an action that can wield tragic consequences. Bennett shows that a mixture of social naivety, sexual inexperience and romantic idealisation can lead to misguided decisions concerning romantic relationships – decisions that are often irrevocable, given the moral climate of the period. And Corelli, true to her characteristically sensational approach to fiction, portrays the morally damning effects of sexual knowledge and sexual liberty on the souls of Late Victorian and Edwardian women – sexual deviance that results in these women being stripped of their femininity. Indeed, one only has to take note of the recurring theme of, or at least recurring allusions to, sexual control, mostly in the form of support given to

individual sexual restraint, in the novels of each of these writers to realise that this myth of passivity was not given much credence during the era itself.

The popular novels of Bennett and Corelli add evidence to existing histories of Late Victorian and Edwardian women by demonstrating that, while some shifts occurred that challenged the position of middle-class women at the turn of the twentieth century, the status quo continued for a vast majority of them. New space and opportunities were slowly being created for women during this era. Corelli's frequent references to the threat represented by the 'New Woman' and Bennett's portrayal of the motivations and ambitions of a likely 'new woman', in the form of Hilda Lessways, support this. However, as Bennett's subsequent exploration of Hilda's disappointment and her frustration as she realises that her experiences in the male realm of employment are destined only to be brief, helps to reaffirm the continuing separateness of acceptable spheres of male and female activity. His portrayal of middle-class women as they are trained for a life overwhelmingly within the domestic realm, and his depictions of them once they are firmly planted within that sphere – a sphere from which many derive a sense of purpose and of fulfilment – acts to further confirm the notion that the status quo remained largely intact. The boundaries dividing the male and female realms may not have been immutable, but neither were they easily shifted.

In line with this, Bennett's novels strongly imply that changes were occurring affecting the position of middle-class women, but that awareness of these had not necessarily filtered down to affect the lives of individual women themselves. For the most part, then, these shifts were limited to affecting attitudes and ideals at a societal level. And so, Corelli's tendency to concentrate on gender ideals helps to explain why her novels could proclaim with such vigour that the world was in an absolute state of flux as far as middle-class women were concerned. Larger social shifts did influence the shaping and reshaping of Victorian ideals. For example, expanding education and employment opportunities for women did necessitate some modification of ideals that previously demanded that women find purpose

and self-worth solely in the roles of wife and mother. And Corelli's fiction responded to this. For instance, while her novels assert that middle-class women should be proud to display their intellectuality, they also demand that this be done only within a prescribed context. That is to say, it is acceptable for middle-class women to create works of art and of literature that exhibit their intellectual abilities, because these forms can be produced within a home-like environment – thereby retaining faith in the principle of separate spheres for men and women. But her novels conveniently ignore the paradox inherent in this – that these works are primarily produced for public consumption, which serves to place female intellectuality on public display.

Indeed, contrary to acknowledging or attempting to align the many paradoxes inherent in her philosophies, Corelli completely overlooks their existence. Instead, she reverts to a zealous reinforcement of traditional values, especially regarding feminine idealisation, in order to appear to restore a sense of order and of simplicity – an antidote to a world in a supposed state of moral turmoil. Corelli reacts to perceived challenges to the position of middle-class women by offering her readers a model of life that, she declares, once again values feminine self-sacrifice, spiritual superiority, sexual innocence and female protection from the harmful influences of the modern world – a model that also promotes the doctrine of male supremacy. Faced with the increasing, albeit slowly increasing, availability of alternatives to marriage and motherhood, Corelli's books also reinforce the notion that love should be a woman's primary, although significantly not sole, desire. Any woman who does not appear to embrace romantic love above all else, or if she is unfortunate enough to be a spinster, who does not embrace the love of God and of humankind, is not worthy of the label 'woman'.

In keeping with the *Woman* motto, 'Forward! But Not Too fast!'⁹⁸⁷, Bennett's and Corelli's novels reveal an acceptance of a degree of social and moral

⁹⁸⁷ Again, *Woman* being the magazine that Bennett worked on during the 1890s. See chapter 1 'A History of Women's Emotions Using the Novels of Bennett and Corelli'.

transformation as it affects the position of unmarried middle-class women. However, accompanying this acceptance is a modest, sometimes even a conservative, approach to change. The ambitions of women like Hilda Lessways and Rose Stanway are accepted in Bennett's novels, even if they are considered peculiar or extraordinary. Still, these books make it clear that such women are not typical, and that the majority of their middle-class peers continue living within the domestic sphere – arguably content to be doing so, sometimes even happy. Corelli's reshaping of gender ideals reflects her position on change. Her approach is much more conservative than that revealed in Bennett's fiction. For, although she endorses some social and moral shifts, especially regarding the promotion of female intellectuality, her novels overwhelmingly endorse a 'return' to traditional values – an approach specifically designed to restore a sense of stability, thereby defying change itself.

The Late Victorian and Edwardian era presented itself as a particularly appropriate period in which to investigate the value of popular novels for insights into single middle-class women's interior lives because it is generally considered to be a time of simultaneous marked social and literary change. And examining a sample of the novels of Bennett and Corelli appealed precisely because of the respective levels of popularity that they each attained within this transitional world. But the pertinence of developments in the literary marketplace at the turn of the century in no way precludes the value of examining fiction at other times for their historical significance. Alison Light's study of a range of novels for what they reveal about femininity and conservatism during the inter-war years and Robert Druce's investigation of the bestselling success of Enid Blyton and Ian Fleming – novels that catered to an even greater mass audience than that studied in this thesis – proves this. Doubtless, the fiction of a number of other periods and societies is equally ripe for similar exploration.

Bennett and Corelli offered the valuable opportunity for comparing the nature and worth of historical material garnered from middlebrow and bestselling works of fiction. But, again, this approach is in no way definitive. An examination of a different type of sample – for instance, of a wider range of authors from the same background or a broader cross-section of genres of fiction, each with their own peculiar slant on the relationship existing between the text and the reading public – would yield different results from those achieved here. For, as this thesis has argued, the works of individual authors act as windows on the world in which they are written – and the positioning of those windows corresponds with the position of the authors and novels in that world. It follows, then, that the nature of the insights offered to historians varies accordingly.

Furthermore, the method used in this study to draw out historical insights from the novels of Bennett and Corelli may also change depending on the size and character of the particular sample of fiction chosen. The approach outlined here is recommended for examining the type of novel that was common in the Late Victorian and Edwardian years – and indeed to explore the comparative virtues and value of middlebrow and bestselling novels. But, with a different sample, methods may vary. And only with greater employment of fiction within the discipline of history will the range and scope of useable or suitable approaches become more apparent.

What is clearly apparent, however, is that there remain many aspects of the history of interior lives and of the history of women that would benefit from extended exploration. There are still many ‘gaps in the story’ and ‘silences in the evidence’, to use Raphael Samuel’s words – ‘gaps’ and ‘silences’ that surely would profit from the richness of historical understanding offered by novels.⁹⁸⁸ This thesis has confined itself primarily to the study of relatively young unmarried women in fiction, but there are numerous other aspects or stages of women’s lives that

⁹⁸⁸ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, vol. 1, *Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, Verso, London and New York, 1994, p. 431.

warrant analysis – for instance, both motherhood and widowhood. Furthermore, the history of *mentalité* and of emotions relates to so many facets of both individual and community lives that any list of potential ideas for further historical investigation would be extensive. One that appeals to me, for example, is an analysis, through fiction, of the emotional relationships existing between members of different generations – a study that would bear some similarity to Linda Rosenzweig’s study of mother-daughter relationships in the United States at the turn of the century.⁹⁸⁹ Arnold Bennett’s novels are very strong in this area – about men as well as women. His fiction reveals a particular interest in exploring the tension apparent between fathers and their daughters and sons – one only has to recall the troubled relationship Anna Tellwright has with her father (*Anna of the Five Towns*) or that which Edwin Clayhanger has with his father (*Clayhanger*) for illustration of this. A study of relationships such as these would not only provide insights into actual and expected relations between parents and children, but also a wider understanding of how concepts of parenthood changed over the Late Victorian and Edwardian years – if indeed they changed at all.

As the whole field of emotions history continues to expand, opportunities for delving into new spheres of investigation or for building on existing ones appear almost limitless. Fiction will go on offering exciting possibilities for accessing areas of the past for which there are relatively few other sources available. The specific relationship that popular novels in particular enjoy with their own society – in the ways that they reflect as well as challenge or contest prevailing views – recommends them as invaluable historical material. And, so much of their worth to historians rests with the fact that these texts offer a window into a living society – by means of writers and readers as they attempt to make sense of the transitional world around them.

⁹⁸⁹ Rosenzweig uses a range of sources for her study, but does base one chapter on insights garnered from novels. (Linda W. Rosenzweig, *The Anchor of My Life. Middle-Class American Mothers and Daughters, 1880-1914*, New York University Press, New York and London, 1993.)

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